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retro GAMER



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ALSO INSIDE

DAVID LOWE | BLUR | BLACK ISLE STUDIOS
MASTER OF DARKNESS | BODY BLOWS
PC-ENGINE CD | DUNGEON KEEPER | TUSKER

F-ZERO

25 YEAR LEGACY

RACING'S TURNING POINT



FEATURING

- THE IMPACT ON RACING GAME RIVALS
- THE OUTLANDISH TRACKS THAT BOOSTED THE GAME TO FAME
- HOW MODE 7 TECHNOLOGY RETURNED NINTENDO TO POLE POSITION



IN THIS FUTURISTIC ISSUE

AMSTRAD GX4000 SHOULD ALAN SUGAR'S FAILED CONSOLE BE A PART OF YOUR COLLECTION?

XENOPHOBE HOW RAMPAGING MONSTERS LED TO MIDWAY'S INNOVATIVE SHOOTER

MAX PAYNE REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT ON CREATING BULLET TIME

IMAGINE PUBLISHING
Digital Edition
GreatDigitalMags.com
ISSUE 143

THE RETROBATES

FAVOURITE F-ZERO GAME



DARRAN JONES

While the original remains a firm favourite it's the N64 sequel for me. It might look ugly, but it's absolutely stunning in motion with some gloriously silly over-the-top track design.

Expertise:
Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine

Currently playing:
Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures

Favourite game of all time:
Strider



NICK THORPE

I never got to experience it in the amazing Cycraft cabinet, but even in the standard motion cabinet *F-Zero AX* is incredible.

Expertise:
Owning six Master Systems (I sold one)

Currently playing:
Shovel Knight

Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog



PAUL DRURY

I was first introduced to the series with its appearance on the GameCube and I'm still very fond of *F-Zero GX*'s dizzying speed and purity of design.

Expertise:
New Faces finalists of the Seventies

Currently playing:
The Witcher

Favourite game of all time:
Sheep In Space



JONATHAN WELLS

I'm going to stick with the original, I enjoyed the tracks but would have picked it for the soundtrack alone.

Expertise:
Tackling dirty nappies and retro spreads

Currently playing:
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Favourite game of all time:
Day Of The Tentacle



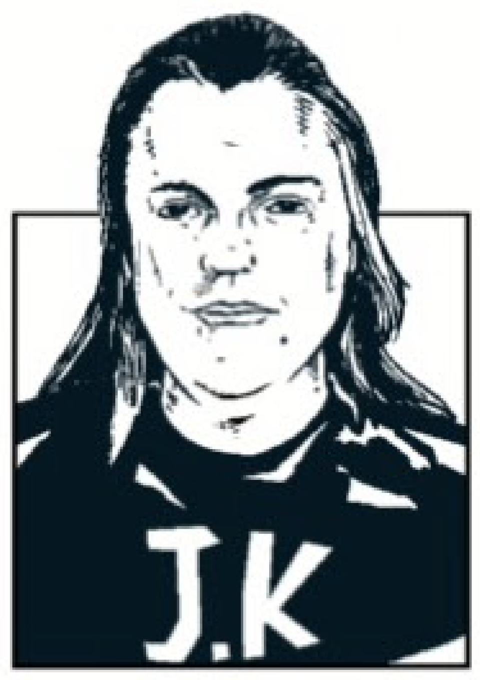
PAUL DAVIES

The first one. The end.

Expertise:
Repeatedly banging my head against a brick wall

Currently playing:
Destiny

Favourite game of all time:
Ghouls 'N Ghosts



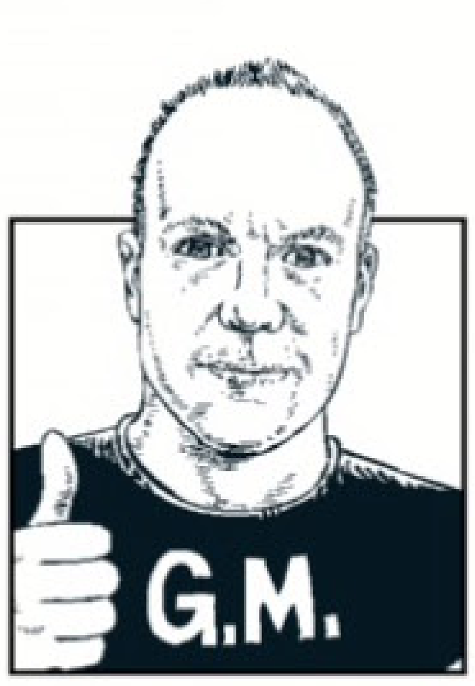
JASON KELK

The only *F-Zero* I properly got into was the original for the SNES and even then I was rubbish at it!

Expertise:
Being a homebrew hero

Currently playing:
Wizball (Spectrum)

Favourite game of all time:
Io



GRAEME MASON

I must confess the only one I've played is the original on the SNES, so I'm going to have to go with that one.

Currently playing:
Star Wars: Battlefront

Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4



MARTYN CARROLL

The original. Growing up my best mate had a SNES and as an Amiga owner it was the one game I was really envious of.

Expertise:
Sinclair stuff and 8-bit gaming in general

Currently playing:
Mario Kart 8

Favourite game of all time:
Jet Set Willy

LOADING...



It's nice to be blown away by a videogame. It's happened to me on many occasions but my experience of *F-Zero* was particularly memorable. I was a Sega fanboy in my teens and early twenties. I had used my first pay packet to order a Master System from my mum's catalogue and a few years later I imported Sega's Mega Drive.

When the SNES came out my friend, Paul, was one of the first to import it from the Video Game Centre and he picked it up with all three available games: *Pilotwings*, *Super Mario World* and *F-Zero*. While *Mario World* and *Pilotwings* were amazing, it was *F-Zero* that really blew me away. It was astonishing to look at and had some mind-blowing course design. It was a revelation for me and I ended up trading in my Mega Drive for a US SNES, such was its impact.

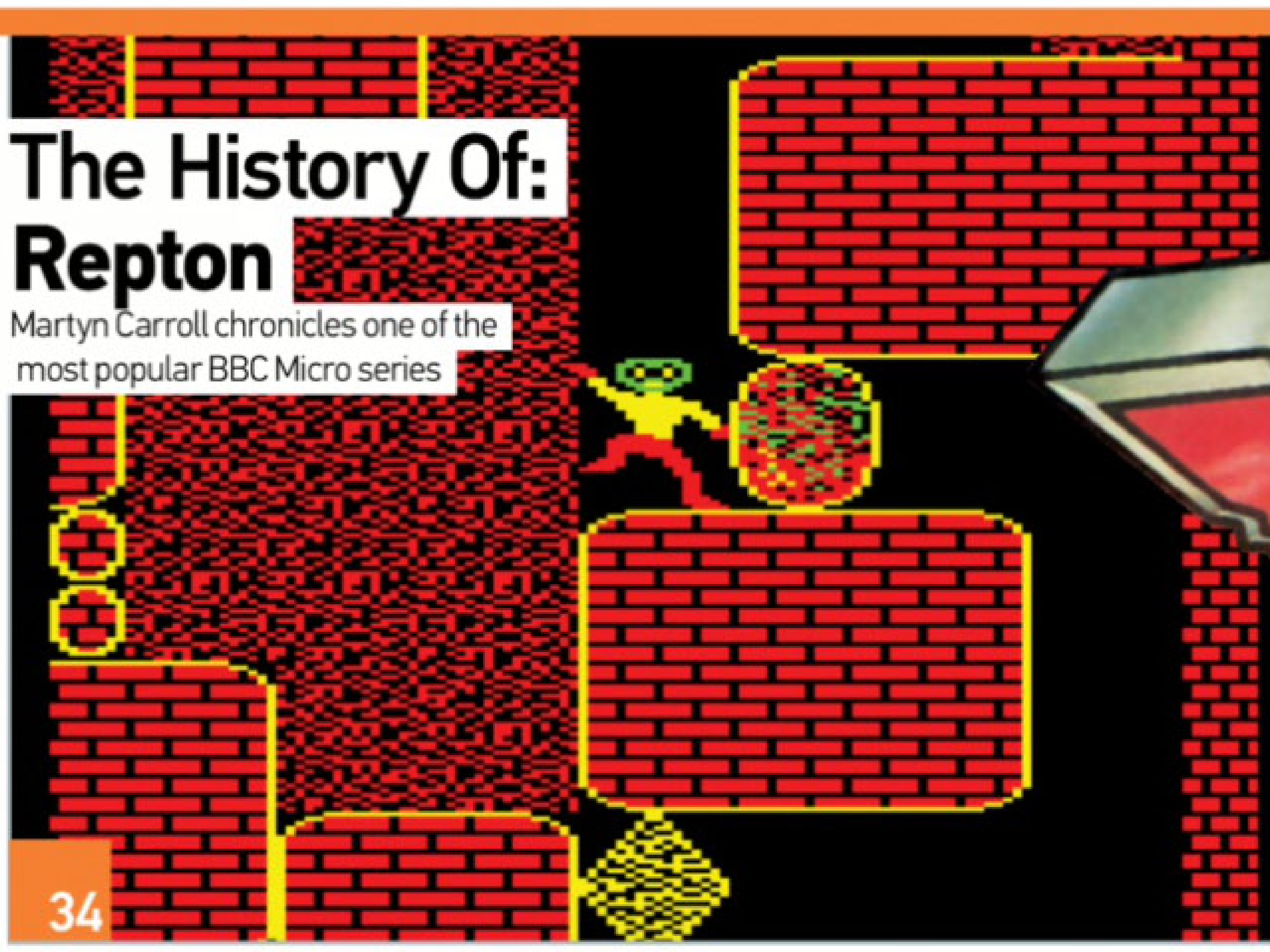
F-Zero may not have been the first futuristic racer, but it's arguably one of the most influential and it's satisfying to know that many developers felt exactly the same as me when they first saw it. With any luck Nintendo will one day decide to revisit the series, but in the meantime I'm happy to revisit the superb original. Hopefully, our amazing *F-Zero* legacy article will encourage you to do the same.

Enjoy the magazine!



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RETRO RADAR

REVIVALS

FEATURED



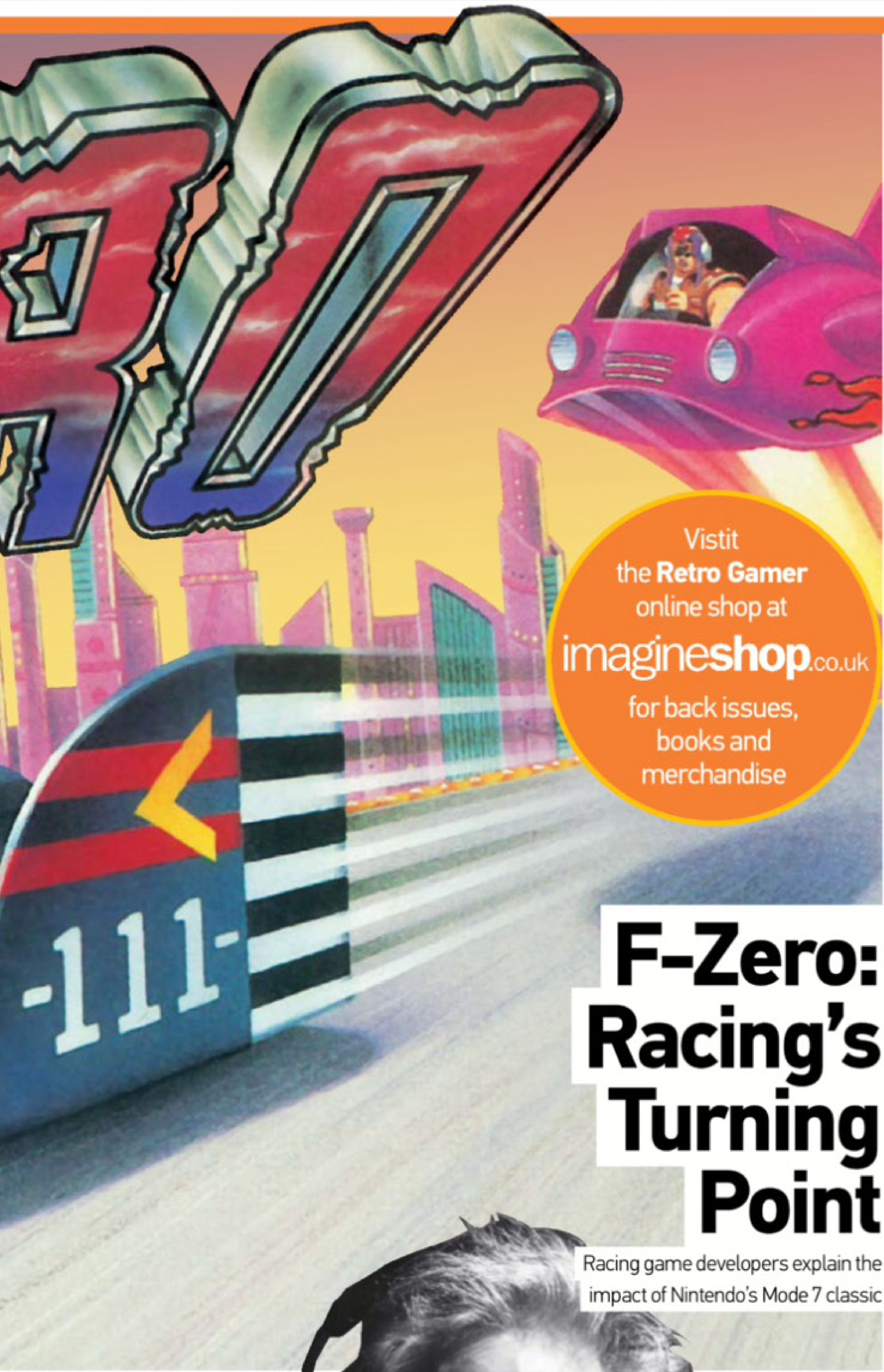
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» The show offered a separate room for traders.

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IT'S PLAY TIME

The North West's Premier Retro Event Returns

While PLAY Blackpool has become the lesser cousin to Manchester's all-encompassing PLAY Expo in the last couple of years, there is no doubting the show remains a genuine delight for retro fans. Held once again at the Norbreck Hotel, and over the May Day bank holiday, its doors opened at 10am on Saturday and encompassed three whole days, finally closing at 6pm on Monday evening. While this meant the crowds were thinner, there was no shortage of gaming delights to entertain fans with a wide range of eras represented. First to greet visitors was the selection of arcade cabinets with classics such as *Star Wars* and *Out Run* boasting the biggest queues, mixed in with veterans such as *Space Invaders*, *Pac-Man* and *Defender*.

"This was the fifth year for our Blackpool show," Replay Event's Gordon Sinclair tells us, "and one thing we've learned from the community is that they don't like too much change!" The result for attendees was more arcade cabs, a better selection of retro games, and an increased indie games zone. For anyone interested in modern gaming, there were also PS4 and Xbox One areas, a *Minecraft* room and six Oculus Rifts on display. "This show has always had a retro heart and that will never change," says Gordon, "and as it is billed as the arcade, indie and retro gaming show, and those will remain our focuses."

> **"It is the arcade indie and retro gaming show and those will remain our focuses"**
> Gordon Sinclair

Past the bank of arcade machines lay several rows of tables laden with computers and consoles. From an Atari 2600 and Binatone *Pong* console, to a ZX Spectrum, complete with divide device for instant loading of the desired classics, to PlayStations and Nintendo Wiis – every period of gaming history was appropriately represented. Nestled between these sat a bank of modern PCs all running the Oliver twins' latest game, *SkySaga*; Andrew and Phillip were in attendance as well, chatting with all their renowned enthusiasm on anything from *Dizzy* to their latest creation, the aforementioned sandbox MMO. Venturing further through the array of consoles and CRT televisions brought us to a friendly face in Jim Bagley, the veteran coder was proudly displaying his incredible Sinclair ZX81 conversion of *Dragon's Lair*.



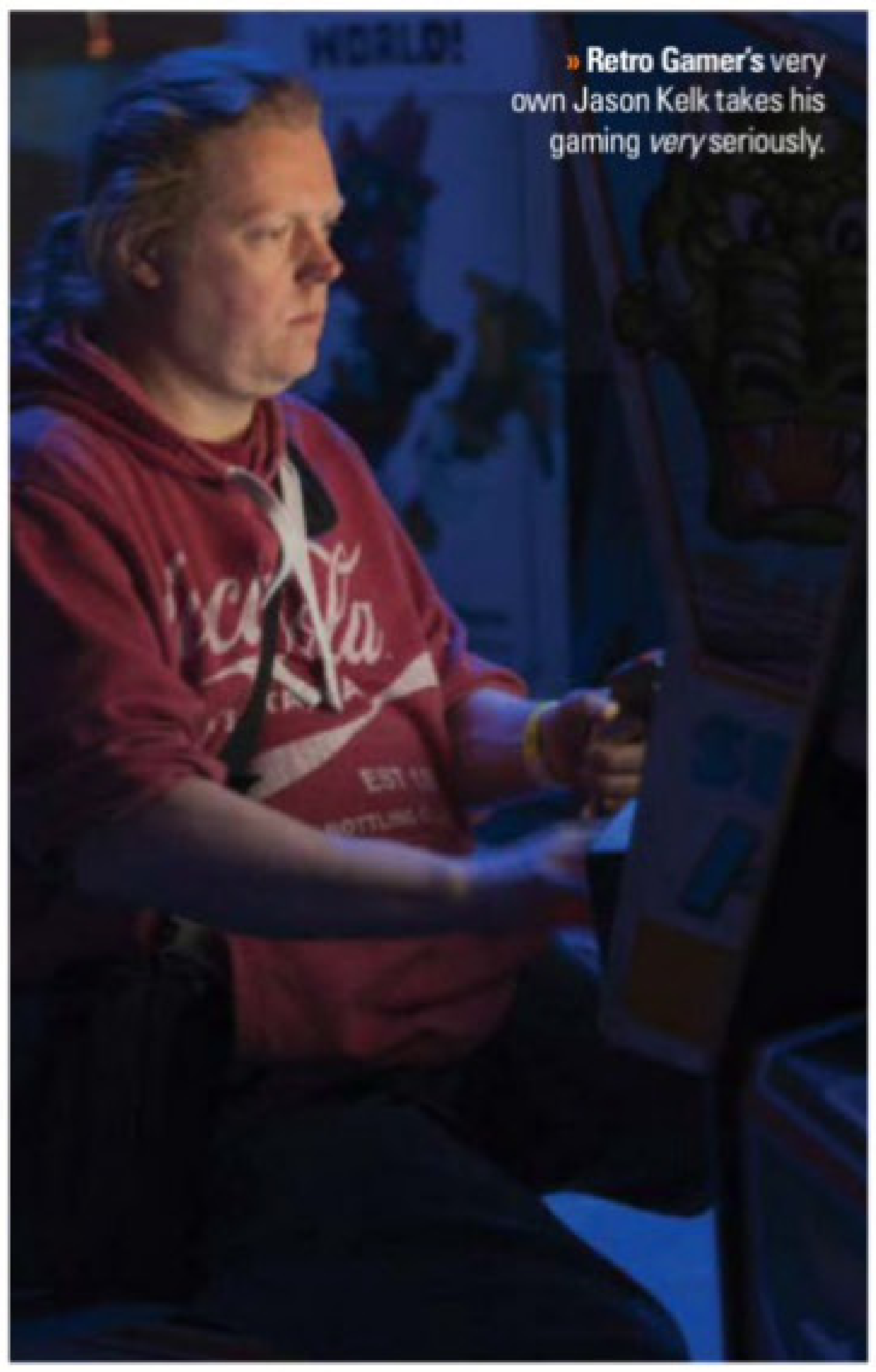
» Jeff Minter was proudly showing off his latest game, *TxK VR*.



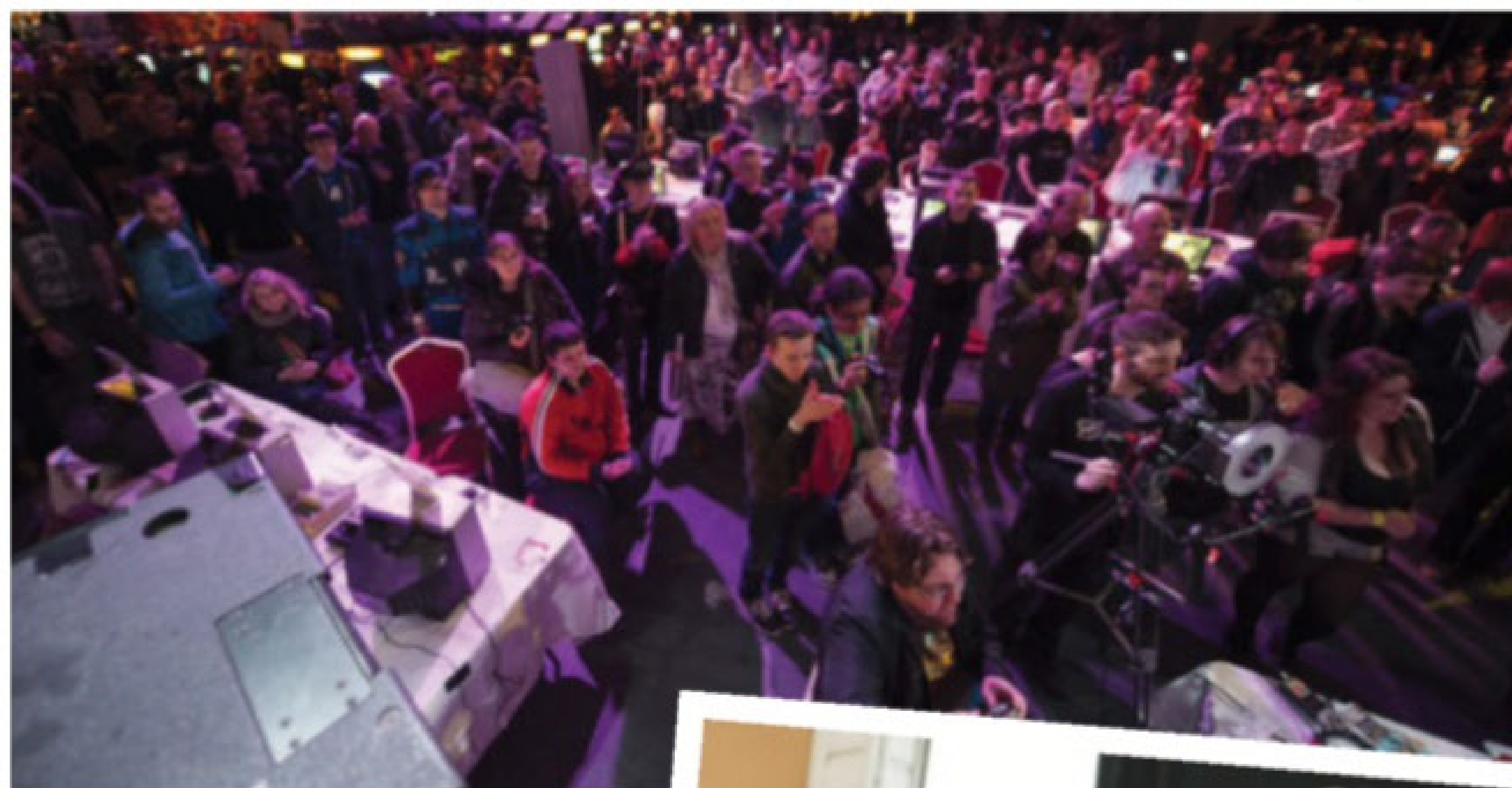


» Arcade games proved popular with young and old.





» **Retro Gamer's** very own Jason Kelk takes his gaming *very* seriously.





» Even henchmen in the employee of corrupt corporations need the occasional downtime.





» The effervescent Oliver twins took attendees through their entire career.

OPINIONS FROM THE SHOW

» Paul Davies and others on this year's event

"What makes it so special is being surrounded by all those machines with their familiar sounds and images once again. The atmosphere created by the retro community at events like this is such a warm and inclusive one"

Paul Davies, Retro Asylum Podcast co-host

"We all really enjoyed it. We had a few computer/server glitches, but once we'd sorted out the hotel internet it all went very well"

Andrew Oliver, game developer, exhibitor

"The event was very well organised. I had the pleasure of meeting many retro fans and being pleasantly surprised that they were familiar with my artwork. I was very impressed by the huge number of arcade and home machines of every variety"

David Rowe , artist, exhibitor

Next to Jim was another veteran and legend in Jeff Minter who was premiering the completed version of *TxK VR* (which had recently been withdrawn due to legal issues) with fans able to enjoy the whole experience thanks to Oculus Rift and Samsung Gear VR. The Oliver twins and Jeff also took part in scheduled talks, taking questions about their entire careers in videogames from adulatory audiences. Other talks included David Rowe, who designed the covers to many famous games such as *Ant Attack*, *Speedball* and *James Pond*, Sumo Digital's Steve Lycett on how to make a racing game and Andrew Hewson, celebrating 35 years of his famous software house, Hewson Consultants. Gaming tournaments were also prevalent thanks to a qualifying heat for the Classic Gaming championships and various competitions organised by RetroCollect and RetroGrade Gamer.

However, one aspect that was notably absent from the show was the array of popular pinball machines. "We partner with Northern Lights Pinball for PLAY Expo, but unfortunately due to other commitments they are not able to support the Blackpool shows," explains Gordon.

The trading hall adjacent to the main room also disappointed a few eager punters looking to boost their games collections, although there was plenty of geek culture items available and David Rowe selling posters of some of his fantastic artwork. Queue management was also much-improved over previous years with Saturday's elongated column of excited gamers cleared in under 30 minutes by staff and volunteers. "Attendance was up for the fifth show running, so we are already talking to the venue about PLAY Blackpool 2016," tells Gordon. "In the meantime, though, we are taking PLAY to the south as we launch PLAY Margate where we hope to reproduce the Blackpool magic on the Kent coast."

PLAY Blackpool proved that there is a support for retro events in the UK, be it youngsters wanting to experience retro greats for the first time or veterans rediscovering the games they loved.

PLAY Margate takes place on the 21st, 22nd and 23rd of August 2015, for tickets go to playmargate.com. Dates for the new PLAY Expo in October will be announced soon. Follow Replay Events on Facebook for updates. *





» While no screenshots of *Bloodstained* are available yet, the concept art shows a very familiar style of game.

'IGAVANIA' SLAYS KICKSTARTER TARGETS

CASTLEVANIA'S KOJI IGARASHI RETURNS WITH A SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR

Long-time *Castlevania* producer Koji Igarashi has gone independent with a new game titled *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night*, a platform adventure featuring the exploration and RPG-style progression that marks it as a spiritual successor to his work on that series. The game's Kickstarter campaign succeeded in reaching all of its stretch goals as well as its $500,000 minimum funding target within 24 hours of launching, necessitating the addition of more goals. The campaign had amassed millions of dollars and was still yet to close by the time we went to press.

The game's story follows Miriam, an orphan whose flesh is slowly turning to crystal due to a alchemist's curse, as she battles through a demon-filled castle. Igarashi is leading the project, with development duties falling to Inti Creates, a team well known a variety of *Mega Man* games and the forthcoming *Mighty No. 9*. Veteran *Castlevania* composer Michiru Yamane and Inti Creates' Ippo Yamada will handle the music, and David Hayter will be voicing the main antagonist, Gebel. The game is in development for PlayStation 4, Xbox One and PC and is expected to arrive in the first half of 2017.

PAC-MAN TURNS 35

A NEW GAME IS THE CENTREPIECE OF BANDAI NAMCO'S CELEBRATIONS

Pac-Man is once again being celebrated by Bandai Namco, as the legendary arcade game has reached its 35th anniversary this year. The company held a party to celebrate the anniversary at its Level 257 venue in Schaumburg, Illinois on 22nd May, featuring a birthday cake and an appearance from Toru Iwatani, the creator of *Pac-Man*. The company has also refreshed its Pac-Man iOS apps, offering a new look and new mazes for fans to enjoy.

The biggest announcement was of a new mobile game titled *Pac-Man 256* from the studio Hipster Whale, which provides a novel twist on the game. As usual, the yellow dot-muncher must make his way through a maze while avoiding ghosts, but this time it's an endlessly scrolling maze that's slowly being corrupted by the famous level 256 glitch.



» [iOS] *Pac-Man 256* developer Hipster Whale is best known for *Crossy Road*, which applied the endless template to *Frogger*.

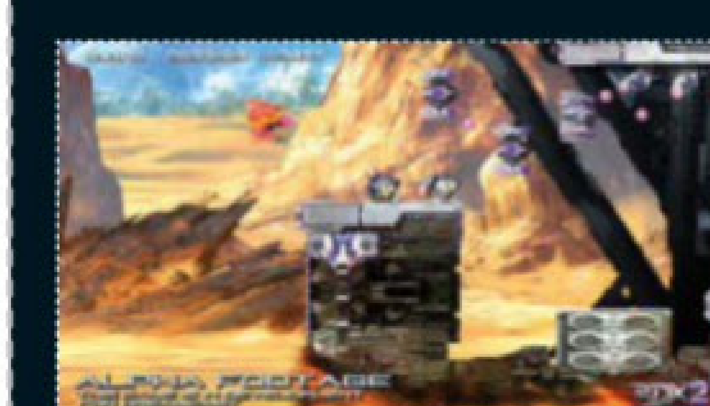
GRANDIA II GATHERS STEAM

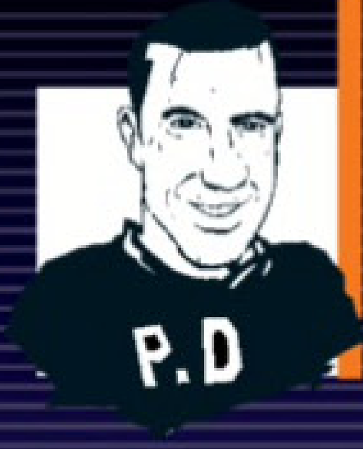
The classic RPG, *Grandia II*, is on its way back to Windows PCs via Steam, courtesy of GungHo Online Entertainment. Though the initial Dreamcast release was critically acclaimed, the original PC version that followed it received a much cooler reception due to various technical issues. The new Steam release is the result of a survey by developers Game Arts, and will be a remastered version based on the original Dreamcast code. GungHo has promised updated visuals for an HD experience, all-new achievements and more. No release date has been set at present, but we'll keep you updated as news emerges.



REDUX RETURNS

Hucast Games recently confirmed its ongoing support of the Dreamcast with the announcement of *Redux 2*, a brand new shoot-'em-up scheduled for May 2016. The game is the fourth game in the *Dux* series since 2009, and a direct sequel to last year's *Redux: Dark Matters*. Unlike the previous game, the project is being funded through sales of a limited collector's edition rather than a Kickstarter campaign. The developers are promising seven stages and two-player co-op play, as well as support for peripherals such as the VGA box, arcade stick and VMU. Visit redux2.hucast.com for more information.





Here's my bio… Paul Davies

In 1992 I started out on *Mean Machines Sega* and *Nintendo Magazine System*. In 1995 I became editor of *C&VG*. I led the *C&VG* website from 1998 until Christmas 2000, then I left journalism to be concept design manager at Criterion Games. I returned to journalism in 2002 and from 2005 I've been running my own company, Unlikely Hero.

Enduringly Popular

There's a touching moment in Disney's *Frozen* where Princess Anna leaps and then hangs in the air for just a second to mimic the girl on *The Swing* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. It's magical. It is a moment that stays with you on a personal level, and becomes more perfect every time you see it.

We have these moments in games, too, but appreciating them often requires a certain knowledge or an education that most people generally don't share. So when we first stand behind Mario in *Super Mario 64*, gazing at the sky or the ceiling, this feels rather ho-hum nowadays because everyone from Spyro to Marcus Fenix has been doing it ever since. That moment in 1996 was spellbinding, however, just as was the moment Mario leapt off a bridge to swim in and under the water.

The point I'm trying to make here is that for something to become treasured forever it kind of needs something that cannot be copied – not ever. In the best of books, the turn of a page and a turn of phrase allows for a kind of drama and timing that forever belongs there. In film, its the framing of a scene, a subtle change of expression and how music enhances the whole thing which grabs you. So you can understand why some games aim to replicate those aspects, but even with the best of technology it is never truly grasped. As gamers though, but more importantly game fans, we take away what we can. Cloud holding poor Aeris in the water before letting go is probably laughable or just about quaint to anyone who is unfamiliar with the technology constraints of a 1997 PlayStation RPG.

As a group of likeminded enthusiasts, we live through these captivating episodes that feel so important and genuinely exciting. Then we all can, if we're honest, look back and laugh quite a bit at how apparently not very special things tend to look in hindsight. Whereas, meanwhile, *Far From The Madding Crowd*, *Star Wars: Episode IV*, *The Little Prince*, and almost anything by The Beatles gets further and further engrained into essential reading, viewing and listening.

At this stage of writing this month's column I'm beginning to feel sadly empty handed in terms of what my beloved games offer that truly endures. It could be that, for a long time to come, we're still going to be just in the business of 'getting there'. Maybe a handful of the maps in *Call Of Duty: Black Ops*, best example being Nuke Town, are a thing that'll stay forever, though they will be polished to feel fresh. Maybe we'll only have *Pac-Man*, *Tetris* and *Space Invaders*, *Angry Birds* and *Temple Run*: all basic ideas that are immune to overblown expectation but are always gripping in a basic way.

Maybe we allow the passage of time to sweep away the most powerful moments as though made of sand instead of stone. The one thing that we know we can share with anyone is the promise of spine-tingling, mind-boggling experiences that *Moon Cresta* has in common with *Destiny* and *Potty Pigeon* has with *Yuka-Laylee*. We should value the fun of discovering these moments and the unique conversations to be had; that the most enduring quality of videogames is that they're always searching for new ways of expression, and always new people to discover them. *

"We allow the passage of time to sweep away the most powerful moments"



What do you think?

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK | @RetroGamer_Mag | retrogamer@imagine-publishing.co.uk | www.retrogamer.net/forum



» The Metroid Database is a lively site, with frequent front page updates on the latest happenings.



» The site translates previously Japan-only *Metroid* manga for English speaking audiences.



» This amazing Ridley fan art is by Kate McElroy



Devin Monnens

The director of Metroid Database (metroid-database.com) talks to us about the website

So what drove you to start the Metroid Database?

The Metroid Database was launched on October 16, 1996 by TJ Rappel. TJ was a *Metroid* fan since the beginning and wanted a place to collect and share information on the series. Remember this was way before Wikipedia and even Google were prominent, so the only way you could get info was through *Nintendo Power*.

What does your role of director of the website mean?

I oversee the site's general direction, but three other guys help run things. My job these days is translating Japanese developer interviews, manga, and other texts like the *Metroid: Other M* concept art. One manga, *Metroid Prime: Episode Of Aether*, the developers didn't actually know about! Factoids like '*Metroid* was named by combining metro subway with android,' came from *Nintendo Dream*'s Famicom Disk System interview we posted, but the sites that repeat this often forget to mention the original source or the other great content of those articles.

What sets the Metroid Database apart from similar fan sites?

As the oldest *Metroid* fansite, we have massive collections of development art, music, comics, scans, translations and maps. While we try to be as comprehensive as possible, wikis have replaced fan sites. It's easier today to crowdsource information, but wikis don't usually cover interviews, strategies, or have a sense of community, so there's definitely a place for us to thrive.

» NES] One of the site's signature projects is *MDbtroid*, a modernized version of the original NES game.



Why do you like the *Metroid* games so much?

It's the combination of action and exploration. Unlike *Zelda*, it mixes platforming and ranged combat. Collecting exciting new weapons and abilities makes Samus more powerful and unlocks new areas, so there are always new challenges.

Tell us a little about the Bestiary.

The idea was started by staff member Ryan Barrett in 2011, and released on the MDb's 15th anniversary. Our DeviantArt volunteers created original artwork for every creature in the series, and our staff helped make the *Metroid Prime*-style entries. It's incomplete, but we're always looking for more volunteers.

What is *Metroid Extreme* and what can you tell us about it?

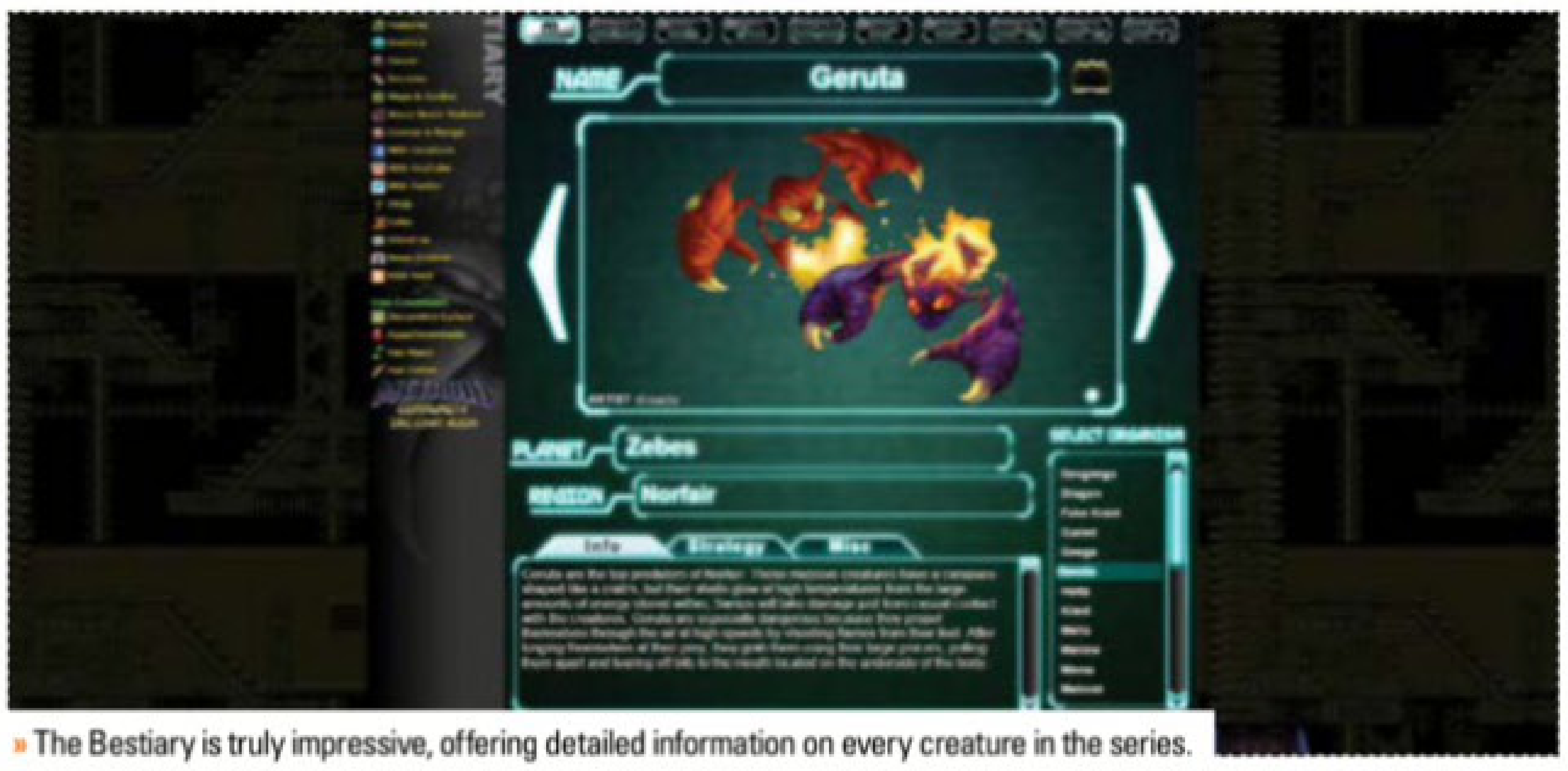
Metroid Extreme is the final part of the Samus & Joey manga written by Koji Izuki. *EX* was printed monthly in *Comic Bom Bom*, a Japanese magazine similar to *Shonen Jump*, and is hard to find – even the author didn't have back issues! I finally got them all and they are being 'scanlated'. I've been corresponding with Koji-sensei and sending him our masters files for his collection. He is happy to know English-speaking folks are enjoying his work more than ten years after the original release.

Are there any other projects the Metroid Database has done?

In 2010, Ryan created a *Metroid* ROM hack called *MDbtroid*. All the character graphics were updated to match the style of *Zero Mission*, and it integrates Neill Corlett's minimap and pause screen. Playing *Metroid* is now even more fun!

What is it about *Metroid* that makes it remain so popular?

The strength of Samus as a character, the gameplay, and the vibrancy of the game worlds. *Metroid* may have a smaller fanbase than *Zelda* but the fans feel strongly about the series. *



» The Bestiary is truly impressive, offering detailed information on every creature in the series.



HOPPER
"I received this game with my original ZX81 back in the day. Although very primitive by today's standards, it was still an arcade game on my own telly."
PAID: £0

ASTEROIDS
"Like *Hopper*, this arcade clone from Quicksilva was part of the original set of games I got with my first ZX81. They were amazing experiences."
PAID: £0

ZX SPECTRUM
"Like the ZX81, this was a Christmas present from my parents and this is the actual model I was given years back. It also still works!"
PAID: £0

ZX81
"This was my first computer and the first one I got for Christmas from my parents. As such, it's priceless to me and the most precious item in my collection. And it still works!
PAID: £0

SINCLAIR PC-200
"Much loathed and also sought after, this has been my personal holy grail. Someone contacted me via my site and offered it for sale at a bargain price."
PAID: £80

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

THAT PIECE YOU CAN'T BE WITHOUT

BOXED PAL ATARI VCS 'HEAVY SIXER'

■ 'It took me over a decade of searching to find a boxed one in good original condition. It cost me £150 from a collector friend, making it my most expensive item. It was the first model of a machine that made videogaming very popular and as such it holds a special place in history."

PAID: £150

Collector's corner

Readers take us through the retro keyhole



BIO

NAME: Ant Harper

ESTIMATED VALUE: £25,000

FAVOURITE CONSOLE: ZX Spectrum

FAVOURITE GAME: *Jet Set Willy*

Ant Harper, the creator of the collector website retrogamescollector.com, only began collecting in the mid-Nineties, but his memories and experiences of videogames stretches back much further. "I would never have got into computing without the ZX81 and ZX Spectrum," he explains, "and they were at a price point that my parents could afford, which was exactly Sir Clive's plan all along." Ant received both computers as Christmas gifts from his folks who also wisely stored them carefully in their loft. "Fortunately both machines had the benefit of being treated to those briefcase-type workstations which made sure everything survived in good condition," he says.

But other than the price, what also appealed to Ant so much regarding Sinclair's finest creations? He says, "I loved the fact they were so accessible from a programming point of view, and it was easy for someone with limited coding skills to make them do something. Other machines relied on POKE and PEEK experts, while Dr. Steve Vickers' Sinclair BASIC manual was fantastic for budding programmers."

Ant even adored the Spectrum's much-maligned rubber 'dead flesh' keyboard and today focuses his collecting for these two iconic computers. "I have too many games to single out particular ones, but I own around 350 ZX81 games and a good proportion of these are very hard to come by, and because of this prices have skyrocketed.

With the impending release of the Vega and Elite's controversial Bluetooth Spectrum keyboard, interest in the computer and its software has ballooned in the last few months. "It's definitely become harder to collect for the Spectrum. You used to be able to find boxes of games at boot fairs and jumble sales, but those days are long gone," recalls Ant wistfully. "The market is thriving for Sinclair-related items so I would recommend that anyone interested gets involved with the community – a network of like-minded friends is worth ten auction websites to any keen collector. Ant himself has recently acquired an item he has been after for some time: a Sinclair PC-200. "It was actually made by Amstrad and it's a horrendous computer," he laughs, "and a complete failure. But I absolutely love it and it has pride of place because not only do I own a working example, but also it looks unbelievably cool in its black and red Sinclair livery." ★

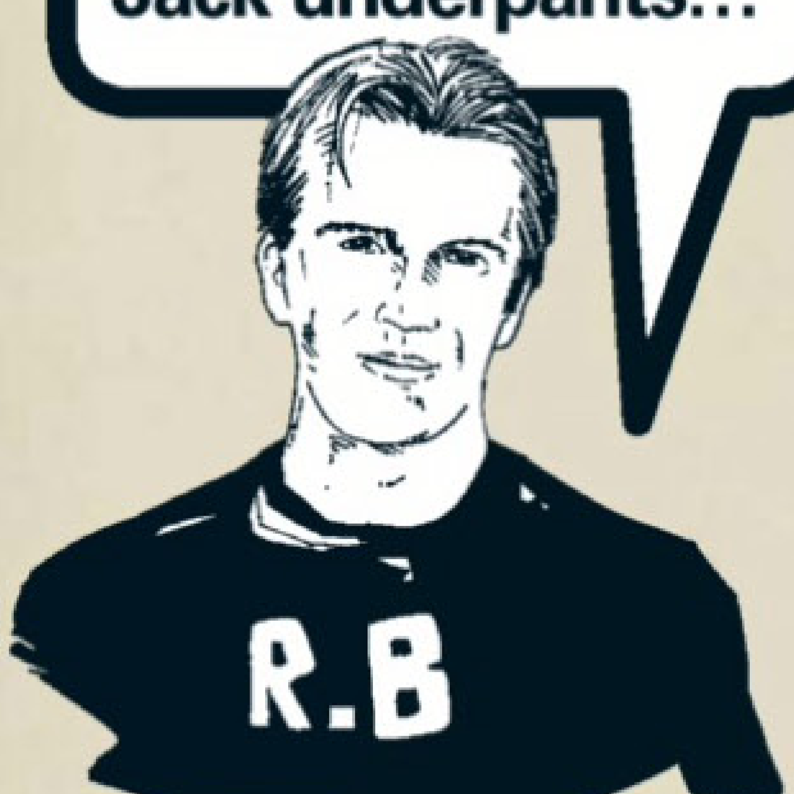
BACK TO THE NINETIES



» [N64] Cars, trucks, a school bus and many more vehicles all tooled up with weapons and ready for battle? Sign us up.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM JUNE 1998

JUNE 1998 – Hasbro buy Atari, Rare releases Banjo-Kazooie, Three Lions whimper, Wetrix gets people moist, Vigilante 8 crashes in, Landmaker arrives while Spice World lacks power. Richard Burton dons his Union Jack underpants…



Details of a done deal involving Hasbro buying former Atari assets were made known this month. Hard drive manufacturer JT Storage had merged with Atari in 1996 buying most of its assets, however, JT began to struggle financially and decided to offload the Atari brand and its intellectual property. This included hardware rights and the rights to many of Atari's classic games.

Cue Hasbro with its fist full of $5 million in cold hard cash. It purchased the rights to classics such as *Missile Command*, *Asteroids* and *Centipede* and promptly placed them into a new division called Atari Interactive, part of Hasbro Interactive, with the intent of rejuvenating them for a new generation. Just two years later Hasbro Interactive was taken over by Infogrames.

Rare Ltd released its Nintendo 64 platform game, *Banjo-Kazooie*, this month. Set in nine sprawling, yet finely detailed, open levels you control two characters, Banjo the honey bear and Kazooie, a red-crested breegul he keeps in his backpack, on a journey collecting items, defeating baddies and deciphering puzzles to progress. Your task is to rescue Tooty, Banjo's sister, from the witch Gruntilda who wants to take Tooty's gorgeousness away by means of a bizzare beauty transfer machine turning her from an utter munter to the fairest woman in the land.

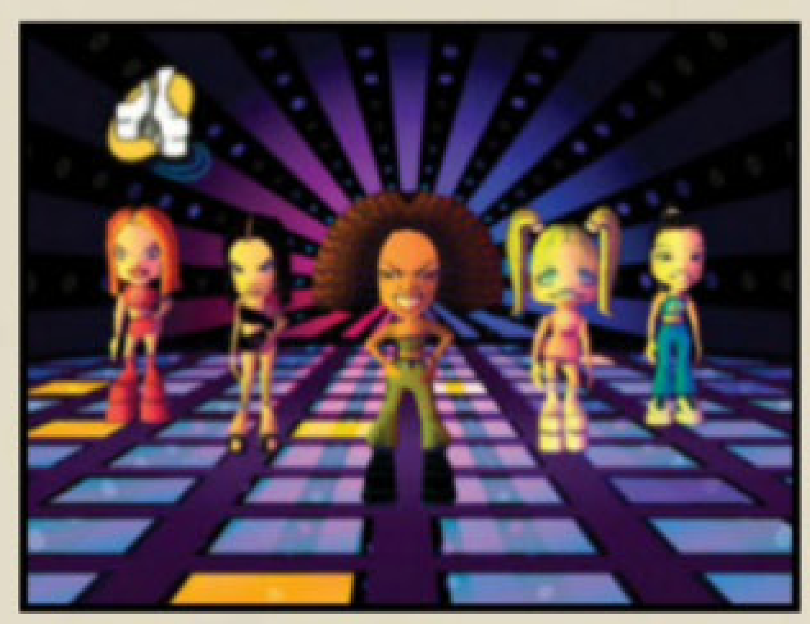
Banjo-Kazooie took over two and a half years to develop and changed dramatically from the original development plan. It started life as a SNES game called *Project Dream*, utilising the pre-rendered graphics style seen in other SNES games developed by Rare. It was also going to be a graphic adventure featuring a boy and his dog and be spread over 16 huge levels. In summary: things changed. Ultimately, *Banjo-Kazooie* was a huge hit for Rare going on to win a string of awards, making lots of money and, unsurprisingly, spawned a rather lucrative sequel in 2000.



» [N64] Every so often a genius little game laden with playability surprises everyone. This month it was *Wetrix*.

With the FIFA World Cup in full swing, the England football team's own game, *Three Lions,* was out and had been endorsed and advertised within an inch of its life. Not that it made an iota of difference, as it was much like an England penalty shoot-out: wide of the mark and dreadfully disappointing.

Take Two Interactive developed the PC and PlayStation versions with both lacking any quality. Ropey player controls, a lack of tactical nuance and the inability to dribble were all things that were sadly absent. Furthermore, it wasn't a new game, rather a rehash of *Alexi Lalas International Soccer.* It was all very reminiscent of US Gold regurgitating Artic's *World Cup* back in 1986 under the glossy veneer that was *World Cup Carnival.*



» [PlayStation] There was very little girl power in *Spice World*, a game so devoid of gameplay it just wasn't funny.



» [Arcade] *Land Maker* was one of those Japan-only coin-ops full of quirky graphics, gameplay and ideas which meant it wasn't released anywhere else.

THIS MONTH IN…

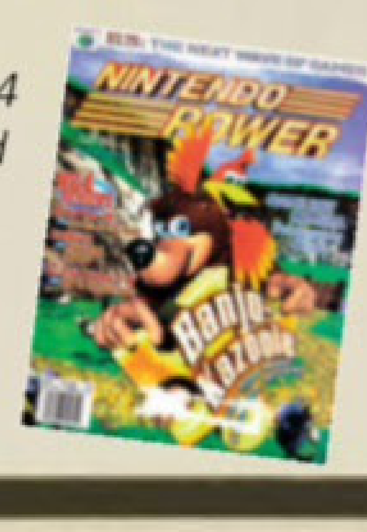
GAMEPRO

The *GamePro* team spoke to Ed Boon about the development of the home ports of *Mortal Kombat 4* to PlayStation and N64. Issues with converting polygons and frame-rate limitations were problematic, otherwise all was well. There was also news that *Mortal Kombat 5* was at the concept planning stage.



NINTENDO POWER

The popular Ninty mag had a 15 page feature on the forthcoming E3 show with two of the most anticipated games being *Zelda 64 (*renamed *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time*) and *Twelve Tales: Conker 64* (renamed *Conker's Bad Fur Day*). *Conker* didn't appear until mid-2001 after a major overhaul of the game.



COMPUTER & VIDEO GAMES

There was news that Bandai would be releasing a new handheld in the near future. It'd have a high-res LCD screen and would have 30 launch games. More interesting was the price at 5000 Yen (£30). The WonderSwan was ready to enter the videogame market…





New for June was *Wetrix*, created by Zed Two Game Design, the development studio owned by Ste and John Pickford, and published by Ocean Software. It was an uncomplicated yet testing Nintendo 64 game featuring crisp and colourful graphics with an ingeniously simple premise that absolutely oozed playability.

In *Wetrix* you collect water on your landscape, ensure it doesn't drain away by means of building blocks that raise and lower the land, finally you evaporate it all with fireballs to gain points. Conversely, while building your landscape to contain larger bodies of water don't overbuild. Creating huge mountain ranges to hold in the water could cause an earthquake which will destroy your hard work. *Wetrix* was a very addictive and compellingly playable game helped in no small part by just how uncomplicated it was. The game also features rubber duckies, so that must mean something good, right?

Vigilante 8 developed by Activision for the PlayStation and Nintendo 64 had just hit the streets. This vehicular combat game lets you choose from a variety of vehicles including a school bus, trucks and muscle cars which can be beefed up with weaponry ranging from cannons to homing missiles.

It's not all violence and car wrecks: there's, in fact, a wafer thin storyline. An evil oil consortium wants to destroy all the oil refineries in the USA, cripple the oil markets and crash the economy. Thankfully a group of vigilantes step in to take the fight to them.

Vigilante 8 was good fun and it contained oodles of content including hidden levels, cars and characters. The multiplayer modes are also enjoyable adding an extra dimension to an already accomplished game.

Arcade releases were sparse this month with just one semi-notable arrival in the form of *Land Maker* by Taito. This *Puyo Puyo*-esque game sees you attempt to build and destroy a house by shooting blocks of the same colour against each other which creates walls and a roof, making a nice little home. Being a head-to-head challenge, you combine bricks and your house grows until it destroys itself and the bricks are tossed across to your opponent's area to hinder them further. The land your house sits on is also shunted down screen. If it falls off the playing area, you lose. *Landmaker* was colourful and fast-paced but the appeal wore thin quickly.

Although the coin-op was a Japan-only release it did later get ported worldwide to PlayStation with additional puzzle and battle modes making the home version more varied and interesting than the arcade original.

I'll tell you what you want, what you really really want… and it's definitely not *Spice World*, the new Spice Girls videogame, released on PlayStation. *Spice World* is one of those games that will take up 30 minutes of your life and never be touched again. You control your favourite *Spice Girl* who must mix a song, teach dance steps and prepare camera angles for a live show… and that's basically it. *

JUNE WORLD NEWS

6 June saw the first episode of the sitcom *Sex And The City* air on US television. It became popular on both sides of the Atlantic lasting six series spanning 94 episodes.

10 June marked the 1998 FIFA World Cup kick-off in France with the opening game seeing Brazil edge past Scotland 2-1. The tournament would run until 12 July.

19 June ushered in the world premiere of the first *X-Files* movie, *Fight The Future*. Starring David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson as Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. The team must unearth the secrets behind the colonisation of Earth by aliens and subsequent cover-up.

25 June saw Microsoft release Windows 98, the latest edition of its operating system for PC.

June was a fruitful month for new album releases. Notable LPs included *Abandon* (Deep Purple), *Adore* (The Smashing Pumpkins), *Munki* (The Jesus And Mary Chain), *Imagination* (Brian Wilson), *Behind The Front* (Black Eyed Peas), *The Best Of* (James) and *Concerto Suite For Electric Guitar And Orchestra* (Yngwie Malmsteen).

June also saw the premiere of *The Truman Show*. It tells the story of Truman Burbank, played by Jim Carrey, whose entire life from birth to present has been filmed as a part of a live reality television show played out to billions across the world. *The Truman Show* was a touching, thought provoking and satirical look at society and social interaction, not to mention it was funny, too.

CHARTS

JUNE1998

NINTENDO 64



1. Yoshi's Story (Nintendo)
2. GoldenEye 007 (Nintendo)
3. FIFA '98(Electronic Arts)
4. Quake 64 (GT Interactive)
5. WCW vs NWO: World Tour (THQ)

PLAYSTATION



1. Tomb Raider (Eidos)
2. Tekken 2 (Sony)
3. Die Hard Trilogy (Electronic Arts)
4. Crash Bandicoot (Sony)
5. Micro Machines V3: (Codemasters)

SEGA SATURN



1. The House Of The Dead (Sega)
2. Steep Slope Sliders (Sega)
3. Duke Nukem 3D (Sega)
4. Resident Evil (Capcom)
5. Marvel Super Heroes (Capcom)

MUSIC

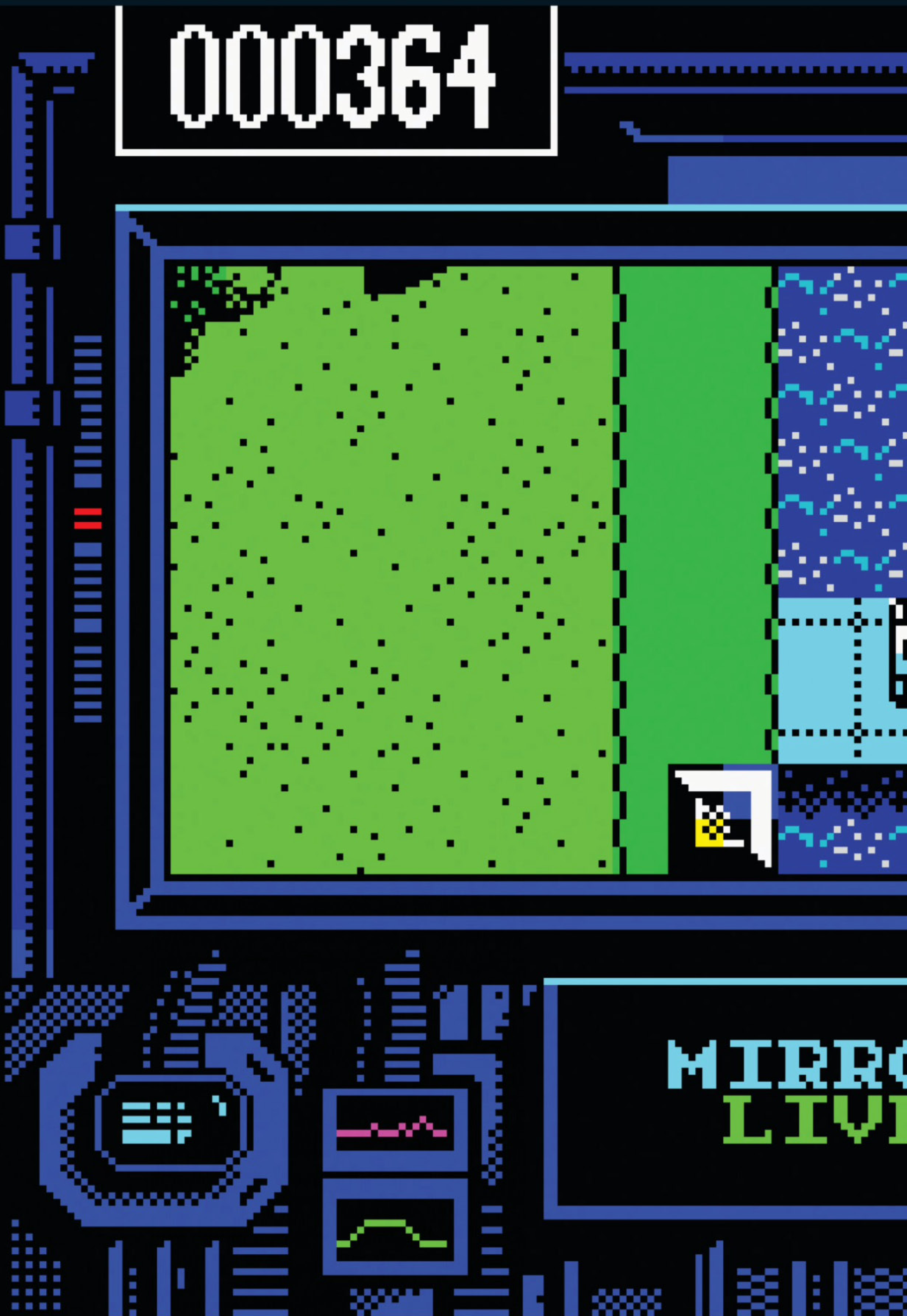


1. 3 Lions '98 (Baddiel & Skinner / Lightning Seeds)
2. Vindaloo (Fat Les)
3. C'est La Vie (B*Witched)
4. Ghetto Superstar (Pras Michael Ft ODB & MYA)
5. Intergalactic (Beastie Boys)



» [N64] Banjo-Kazooie was an excellent offering from Rare, which featured cutting-edge visuals and great gameplay.

retro GAMER.net READER'S REVIVAL





Rebel

"YOU CAN WAKE UP NOW, THE UNIVERSE HAS ENDED"

#89

» GANG OF FIVE » ZX SPECTRUM » 1987

Who can forget this little belter for the old Speccy? Well I can't – even if everyone else can. I first came across this game buried in a bargain bin in Woolworths, it was on a collection tape with *Cobra* and *Street Hassle*. *Cobra* was the reason I picked it up, but in the end I got hooked on *Rebel*.

The aim of the game is to control your tank around weird scrolling industrial landscapes, picking up reflectors and placing them strategically around the level. You must then proceed to turn on a giant laser, which (if the reflectors are placed correctly) should blast open the exit so you can proceed onto the next level.

Also dotted around the levels are enemy tanks, trains and strange looking cubes – all out to snatch a life from you. And beware – if you set the laser off without the reflectors in the correct positions all hell will break lose. Well, you will lose a life anyway.

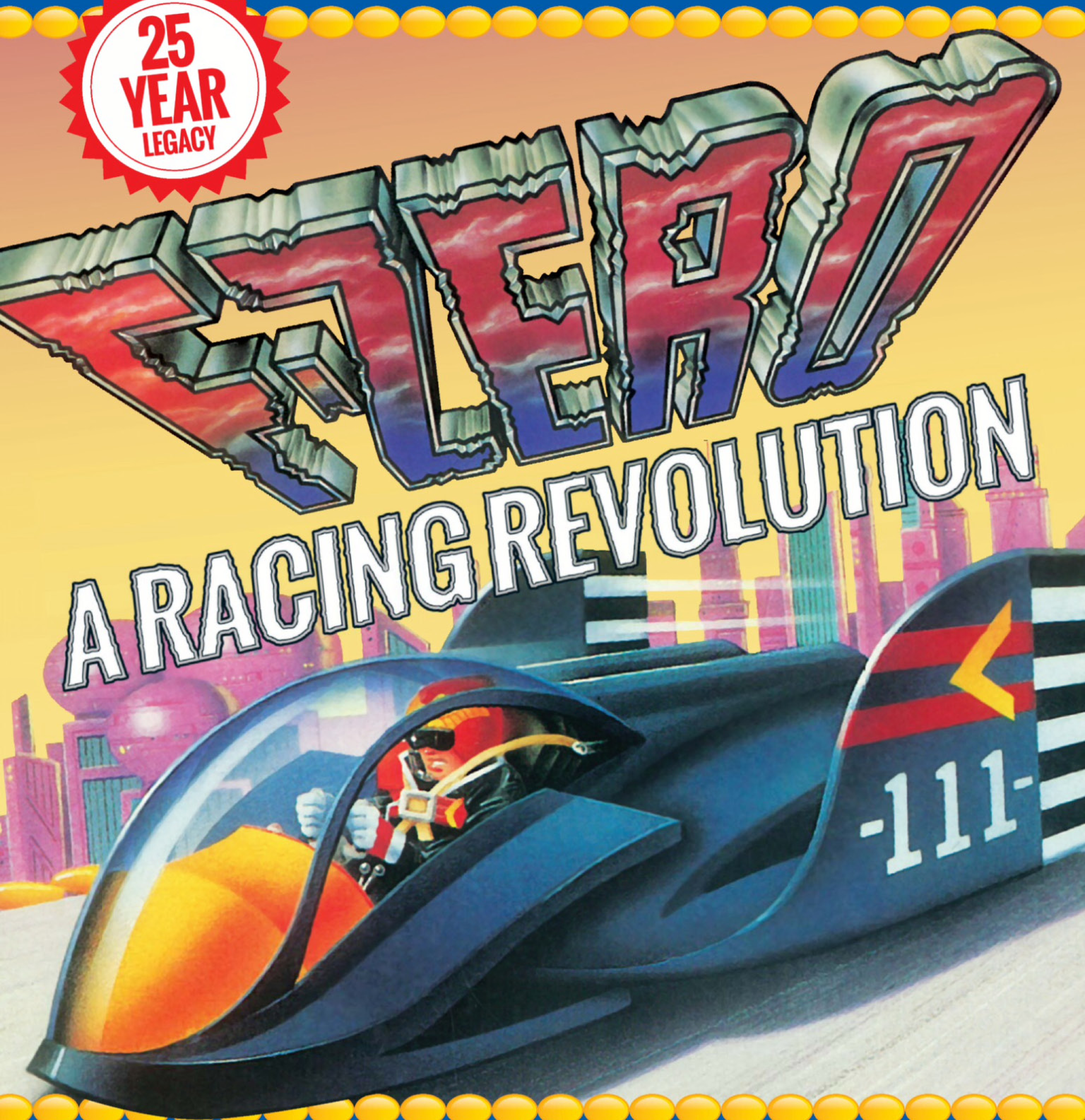
This game is very hard and very frustrating. I have no idea how many levels there are, because I seem to remember only being able to get to level four or five. I have replayed it many times over the years, but I seem to be getting worse with my old age. Now I can't even get past level bloody two. But it still draws me in – it's a fondly remembered game. *

JOHN BARDI

25 YEAR LEGACY

F-ZERO

A RACING REVOLUTION





A COMIC STRIP IS FOUND IN THE INSTRUCTIONS AND ON THE BACK OF THE BOX, ADDING SOME FUN FLAVOUR.

MANY GAMES HAVE A FUTURISTIC THEME, BUT FEW CAN CLAIM TO HAVE SHAPED THE FUTURE QUITE LIKE NINTENDO'S SPEEDY SPECTACULAR. NICK THORPE EXAMINES THE IMPACT OF THIS MODE 7 CLASSIC…

Of all the games released for any given platform, the launch games are perhaps the most important. The ideal launch game makes a positive impact immediately by highlighting the strengths of its host platform, as well as providing a high quality title for players to get stuck into during the lean early months. *F-Zero* was the ideal launch game when it arrived with the Super Famicom in 1990, wowing critics worldwide.

To understand the impact that *F-Zero* had, you need to consider Nintendo's history of conservative business practices – and in specific, its reluctance to replace the NES. While many were questioning how the company could follow up its 8-bit machine, Nintendo didn't see the need to do so – after all, the NES was still selling very well in North America. However, by 1990 the 'pretenders' to Nintendo's throne were starting to form some solid claims with 16-bit consoles. In Japan, NEC's PC Engine had overtaken the Famicom and taken a solid chunk of the market for itself and while Sega had experienced little success with the Mega ▶



[SNES] IT'S NOT THE FIRST FUTURISTIC RACER (POWERDROME AND S.T.U.N. RUNNER ARRIVED FIRST) BUT F-ZERO PROVED MORE INFLUENTIAL.



[SNES] THE MANUAL CALLS THIS A "MAGNETIC FIELD BLOCK COAT" BUT IT LOOKS LIKE ICE, AND SHOULD BE TREATED AS SUCH.

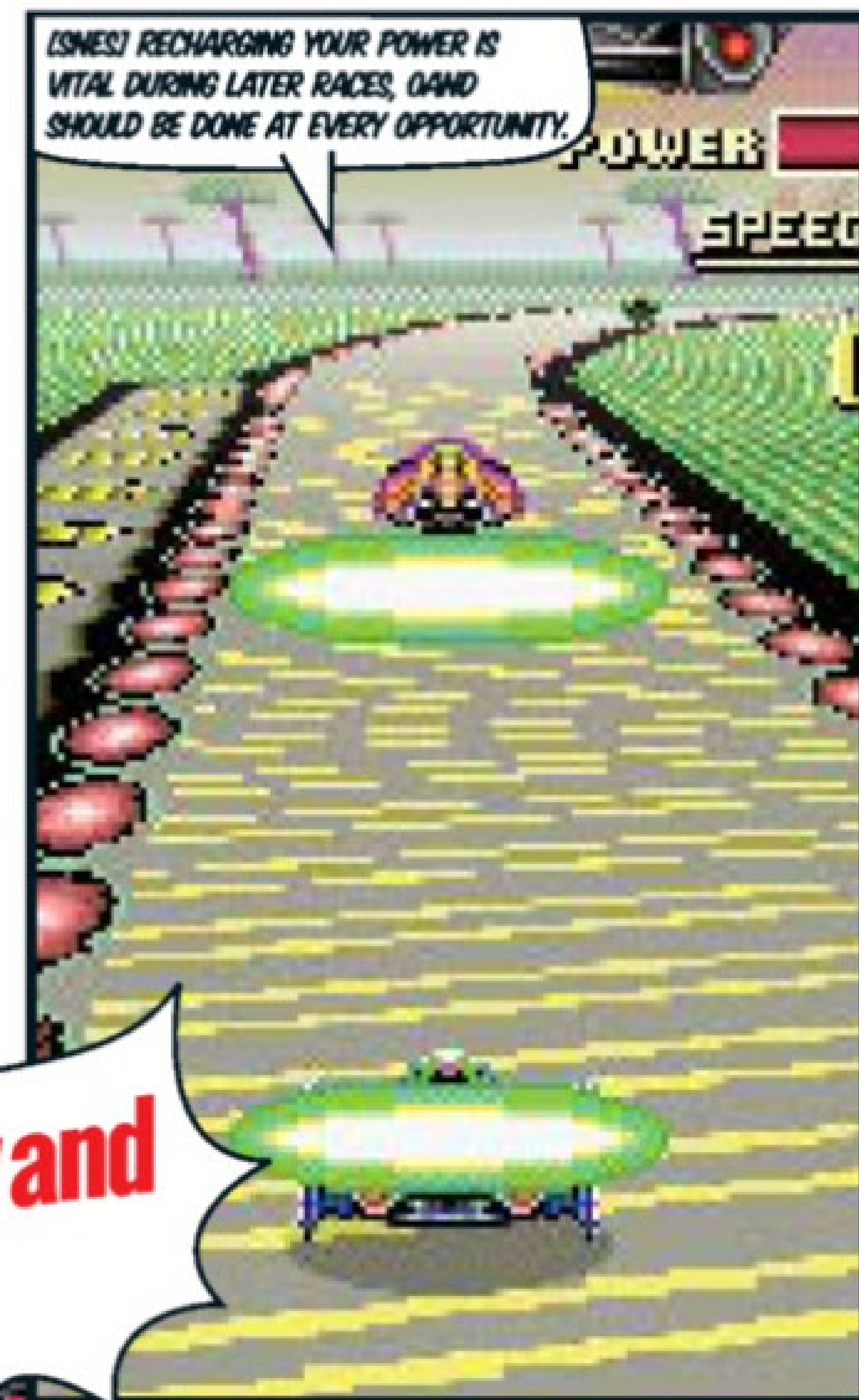
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

With all the futuristic racers (and even retro-futuristic racers) out there, it can be hard to keep track of what happened when. Here's a handy guide…

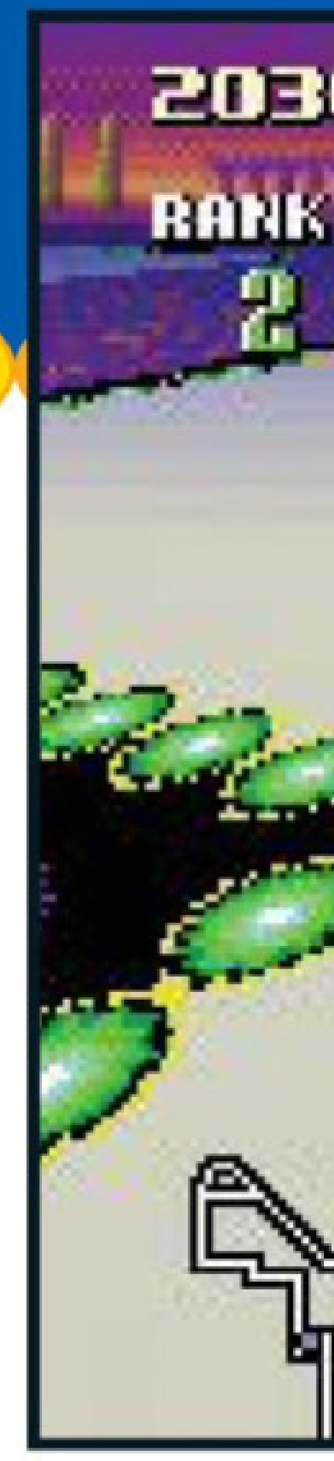
- 1976 – INTERSTATE 76
- 1982 – INTERSTATE 82
- 2000 – DEATH RACE
- 2015 – CYBER SPIN
- 2019 – OUTRUN 2019
- 2048 – WIPEOUT 2048
- 2049 – SAN FRANCISCO RUSH 2049
- 2052 – WIPEOUT
- 2080 – XGRA
- 2090 – BALLISTICS
- 2097 – WIPEOUT 2097
- 2112 – MACH RIDER
- 2116 – WIP3OUT
- 2160 – WIPEOUT FUSION
- 2197 – WIPEOUT PURE
- 2201 – F-ZERO: GP LEGEND
- 2207 – WIPEOUT PULSE
- 2560 – F-ZERO
- 2585 – F-ZERO: MAXIMUM VELOCITY

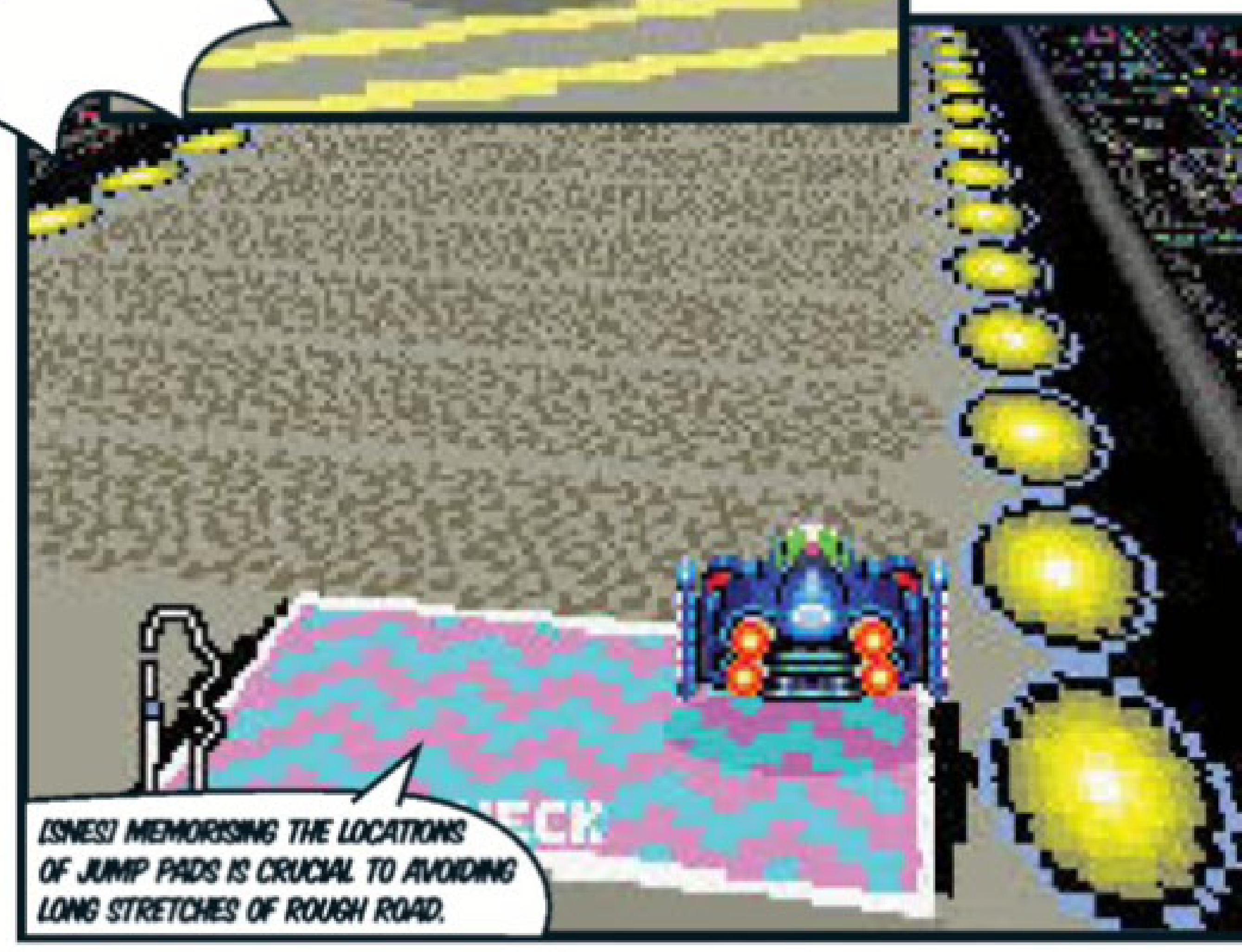


[SNES] NARROW ROADS FENCED IN BY ROUGH PATCHES ARE STANDARD FOR THE COURSE ON SAND OCEAN.



[SNES] RECHARGING YOUR POWER IS VITAL DURING LATER RACES, AND SHOULD BE DONE AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY.





[SNES] MEMORISING THE LOCATIONS OF JUMP PADS IS CRUCIAL TO AVOIDING LONG STRETCHES OF ROUGH ROAD.

▶ Drive in Japan, its American branch was targeting Nintendo in its advertising. Times had changed and Nintendo had to deliver a new machine.

While it had lost ground to competitors by acting slowly, Nintendo's decision to join the new generation late carried some advantages – primarily the ability to create a more advanced machine. The SNES outperformed its competitors in a variety of ways. It could display more colours on screen and had better sound capabilities, but the most exciting improvement that the SNES offered was the famous Mode 7, a graphics mode which gave developers the ability to freely rotate and scale a layer of background. This allowed for the creation of a pseudo-3D playfield which gave the illusion of stretching off into the horizon.

Of course Nintendo needed a game to showcase this unique capability, and Nintendo EAD was set to work on one with Shigeru Miyamoto in place as producer. The game that the team came up with was relatively simple – a racing game named *F-Zero*. Mode 7 was ideally suited to the task of creating roads. In the past, the drawing of roads was often handled by using limited deformation of road graphics to create curves and alter perspective, as seen in games like *Pole Position*. A recently developed alternative approach was to create a fully 3D polygonal road, as in arcade games such as *Hard Drivin'* and computer games like *Stunt Car Racer*. Mode 7, however, allowed for course features such as hairpin turns that were extremely hard to represent using traditional methods, and it could move courses around at an incredible rate with full 3D rendering at that time.

Nintendo had placed a lot of faith in *F-Zero* – as one of just two launch games in Japan, reaction to *F-Zero* would form a substantial part of players' first impressions of the machine. That faith was rewarded, as the game made a rare impact on press and public alike thanks to its technical innovation, and many vividly remember their initial encounter with the game. "I'd seen it in *C&VG* in blurry screenshots, but I saw it in the flesh at an import game shop running on a Super Famicom," recalls Sumo Digital's Steve Lycett. "It looked like something from the future! The best vehicle is pink with flames down the side, that's a pretty bold statement. The fact it whizzed past smoothly with Vegas-esque landscapes animating away just made it visually compelling. That was the same day I decided I needed both the game and the system! The mix of speed, vibrancy and audio was amazing."

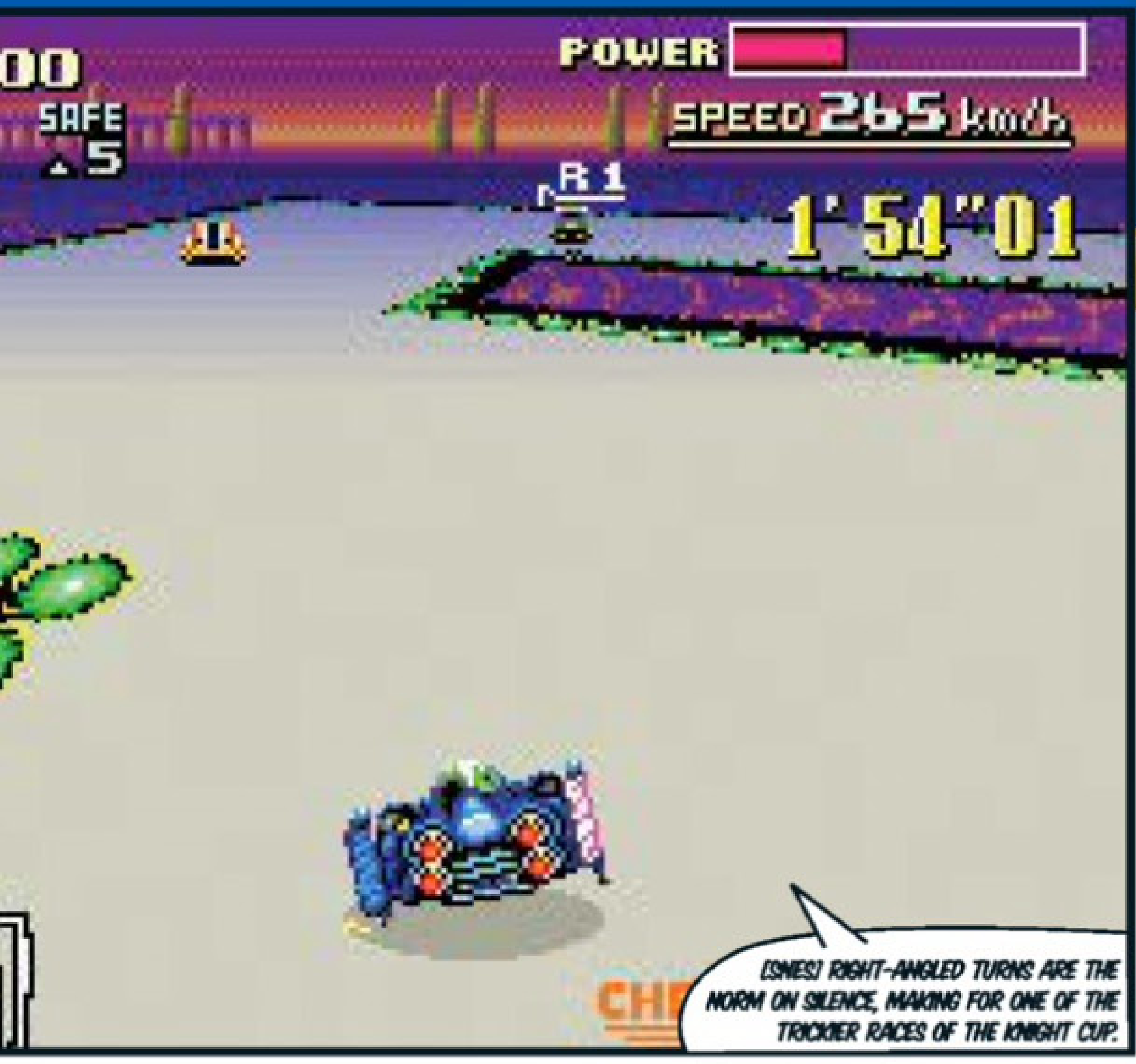
Alex Ward of Three Fields Entertainment, best known for his work on the *Burnout* and *Need For Speed* series at Criterion Games, was similarly impressed. "Back in

> "The mix of speed, vibrancy and audio was amazing"
> Steve Lycett

DID YOU KNOW?

■ The original *F-Zero* had an eight page comic within its manual, explaining the back story of Captain Falcon and his rivals.





[SNES] RIGHT-ANGLED TURNS ARE THE NORM ON SILENCE, MAKING FOR ONE OF THE TRICKIER RACES OF THE KNIGHT CUP.

the early Eighties, I played an amazing arcade game called *Star Rider* by Williams. It blew my mind, so much so that I'm still thinking about it 30 years later. Fast forward a decade. I'm reading about the Japanese version of *F-Zero*. Julian Rignall was one of the first people to play it and write about it. The SNES was Nintendo's wonder machine. Apparently it was the fastest racing game made yet."

The Mode 7 visuals that *F-Zero* employed had successfully turned heads, just as Nintendo hoped. All that was left was for the game built on top of them to keep those heads pointing in the right direction.



F-Zero is a racing game set in the year 2560, in which racers from across the universe compete for glory in an anti-gravity Grand Prix set up for the entertainment of decadent billionaires. The futuristic setting is one Nintendo had previously employed in *Mach Rider*, a NES combat racer featuring high speed action and a hero who looks suspiciously like *F-Zero*'s Captain Falcon. While *F-Zero* takes some of these elements from this previous title, the visual style in the newer game is much more fantastic – hovering vehicles racing on roads floating above densely-packed mega-cities, whereas *Mach Rider* had featured relatively conventional wheeled vehicles on traditional roads.

The futuristic setting is more than just a visual style. *F-Zero*'s races include numerous on-course features to provide additional excitement and challenge for players and while adding more variety to the courses beyond their backdrops. Despite the anti-gravity nature of the vehicles, rough roads will slow down your vehicle and icy-looking magnetic field blocking materials will cause a loss of grip. But while drivers might have experienced these hazards before, it was rather less likely that they would have had to struggle against explosive mines or magnetic fields which draw vehicles off course. Collisions with the side of the track, other vehicles and certain hazards will cause the player's vehicle to lose power, and a total loss of power results in the explosive destruction of your vehicle and a lost life.

Underneath the futuristic setting and unusual hazards, *F-Zero* is an incredibly well-constructed racing game. Players are given a high degree of



Q&A: NICK BURCOMBE

The WipEout designer gives his thoughts on the F-Zero series, and explains how he sought to differentiate his own futuristic racers



Why do you think *F-Zero* had such a impact?
I think I'm right in saying it was one of the first Mode 7 games and so that sense of hurtling into the screen at 60Hz was quite a change on consoles. Games like *Rock N' Roll Racing* and *Micro Machines* typically took the isometric or top down view, but *F-Zero* was something different at the time.

How important would you say the music was to the game?
The music in *F-Zero* was one of the reasons I wanted to have a CD quality soundtrack for *WipEout*. Although I look back at *F-Zero* with great fondness, I think my view at the time was that the music just wasn't good enough quality. I know some of the catchy hook lines are great, but for me – the hardware and chip music in general just wasn't good enough and really I wanted to change that.

Did anything from *F-Zero* inspire *WipEout*?
Two things really. Firstly, Speed! The one thing I loved about *F-Zero* was the sheer speed of the game and with *WipEout* we wanted to capture some of that. Secondly the idea of skimming across the surface and not being attached to the floor with wheels. Of course games like *Powerdrome* were also an influence, but I think between *F-Zero*, *Mario Kart* and *Powerdrome* you can see where my inspiration for *WipEout* came from. Adding the dance music and then, of course, someone else bringing in the graphic design from The Designers Republic, you can probably see how it took on a life of its own.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the track design?
The tracks are designed to suit the game, just making enough out of the jumps and shortcuts you could squeeze from it, although I'll confess – I really struggled with the very narrow ones such as Fire Field.

How do you think *F-Zero X* compared to the *WipEout* games?
I never liked the collisions or the handling to be honest – mind you I didn't like the collisions in *WipEout* either which is why they were the first thing to fix in *WipEout 2097*. And although I can see similarities, I think the omission of weapons was a bit of a let-down, but perhaps they wanted to keep it apart in terms of gameplay from the seminal *Mario Kart*. For me *F-Zero* just stopped evolving in terms of gameplay and become too hard to play.

What do you feel the N64 bought to the series?
I really didn't play it enough to comment knowledgeably, but clearly they were able to go for a lower camera position and were able to do more with track geometry because they weren't contrained to the 2D plane of Mode 7 – but the reality is that we were totally wrapped up in *WipEout* and PlayStation at the same time and so I didn't really spend a lot of time with *F-Zero X*.

Why do you feel the series works without weapons?
I actually don't think it was a plus. I suppose that's one of the reasons the racers I've made, *WipEout*, *WipEout 2097*, *Quantum Redshift*, *Jet-X* and *Table Top Racing* have all had weapons in. *F-Zero* for me became more a battle of man versus track and not man versus opponents. The track got narrower and narrower (a mistake I made on the tunnel in the first track in *WipEout*, too), but faster you go, the more space you need, or you'll be faced with only the hardest of hardcore players being able to have finished it.

Why do you think Nintendo has stayed away from the franchise in recent years?
I'd imagine the same reasons Sony also stopped developing *WipEout*. Future racing was niche, too hardcore and although loved by many, it's a genre that's failed to bring new fans in, whereas *Mario Kart* is a much more broadly appealing game and can cater for most of the mechanics in any *F-Zero* – apart from perhaps the insane speed – but as I've mentioned, this is not a good thing for newcomers, the challenge only satisfies the hardcore gamers.

CIRCUIT TRAINING

The Retro Gamer team looks back on their favourite F-Zero courses



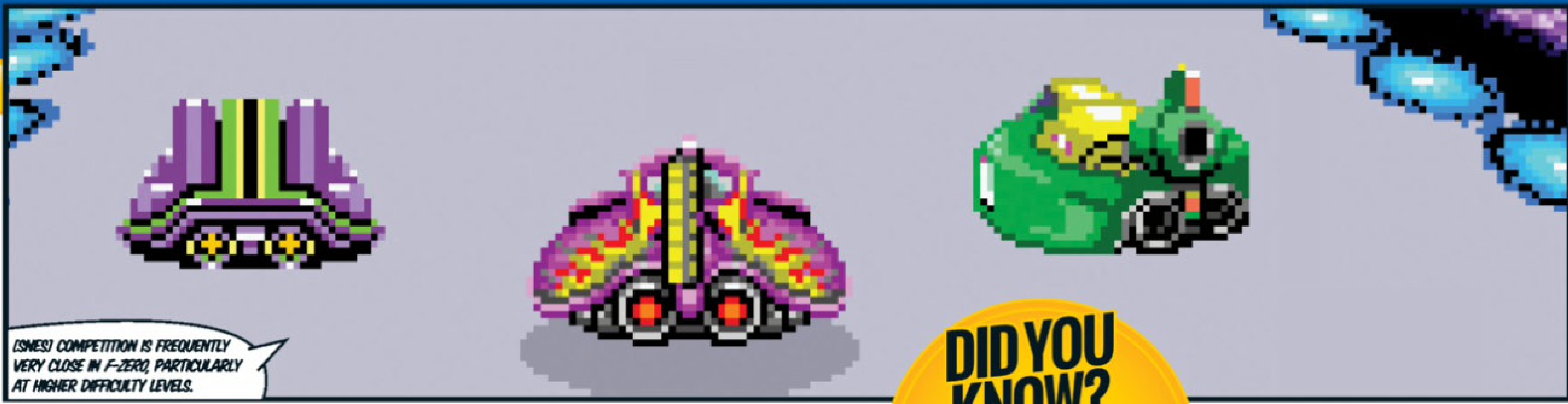
▶ control over their vehicles, thanks to the ability to shift your vehicle's weight with the L and R buttons, which combine with steering to offer greater cornering ability. You'll need to employ this ability frequently, too as the track design quickly becomes very technical, with corners set at right angles, demanding expert driving. Additionally, each of the four vehicles differs markedly in terms of handling, acceleration and top speed, meaning that you'll have to develop different approaches to each track in order to succeed. "It's pure arcade immediacy but with depth you discover as you dig into it," Steve notes. "You start off just being happy winning races, but then you progress to the Fire Stingray ship and then it's all about picking the best lines, dodging hazards with the shoulder buttons and saving up boosts for the last lap."

There's a reason you'll be happy just to win races, as success isn't something that comes easily in *F-Zero*. Races are run under elimination rules, with each lap requiring that the player doesn't fall below a certain position in the race. This starts off at the relatively easy 15th place, but by the final lap you'll need to be in the top three to finish the race. Failing to meet these requirements will see you retiring from the race early and losing a life, impeding your chances of completing the five races that make up a cup, but each completed lap rewards you with a turbo boost which can greatly aid you when used strategically. "The later leagues were very challenging," Alex recalls. Steve agrees: "It was palm sweating and proper hard on Master Class."

Between the expertly crafted gameplay and technical innovations, *F-Zero* was an immediate hit.



[SNES] MODE 7 WAS IDEAL FOR DISPLAYING SHARP TURNS LIKE THIS ONE IN RED CANYON.



[SNES] COMPETITION IS FREQUENTLY VERY CLOSE IN F-ZERO, PARTICULARLY AT HIGHER DIFFICULTY LEVELS.

Critics raved about the game, with *Mean Machines*' Richard Leadbetter stating, "there'll never, ever be anything to touch this graphically on the Amiga or Mega Drive," and declaring it "the definitive console racing game." Players were similarly impressed. "I attended an American university in 1990 and one of my friends picked up the ugly purple American SNES with *F-Zero* with it the day it came out," Alex recalls. "We sessioned the game almost non-stop for two or three days straight. Just seeing the visuals takes me back to a very happy time of gaming. The dawn of the SNES was a great, great time for me."

F-Zero's criticism focused on the limited content of the game, with a 1993 retrospective review in *Super Play Gold* stating that *F-Zero* "has precious little in the way of interesting gameplay elements" and "feels rather empty." But while critics cooled on the game, it continued to serve as an excellent introductory game for new SNES players. "My first time with *F-Zero* was with the son of my grandmother's neighbours, during summer vacations in 1993," recalls Valerio Di Donato, whose studio 34BigThings is currently working on the futuristic racer, *Redout*. "This child had many games for his home console, but I was always insisting to play *F-Zero*. I just remember how fun it was – it had speed, amazing controls, drifts, energy recharge, jumps, awesome floating ships… All kinds of stuff you can't find in a normal racing game." This enduring appeal ensured that the game continued to sell strongly. It eventually secured a re-release in 1997, having qualified for Nintendo's Players Choice budget range in North America by selling over a million copies.

While a sequel seemed inevitable after this success, Nintendo didn't revisit *F-Zero* until the SNES had already been superseded by the N64 – and then only with the Satellaview, a Japan-only add-on which enabled players to download data onto rewriteable cartridges via the satellite radio service, St.GIGA. The initial four-week run of *BS F-Zero Grand Prix* began on December 29th 1996 and consisted of *F-Zero*'s 15 tracks plus a brand new Mute City IV race, contested by four new vehicles. During special Soundlink events, players could play within strict time limits alongside special radio shows designed to serve as the audio accompaniment, usually featuring high quality renditions of the in-game music or guitar rock in keeping with the game's own style. *BS F-Zero Grand Prix 2* ran for two weeks from August 10th 1997 and used the same vehicles introduced in its predecessor. Unfortunately, the Soundlink versions of *BS F-Zero Grand Prix 2* seem to have been lost to history, and video recordings serve as the only evidence of its content.

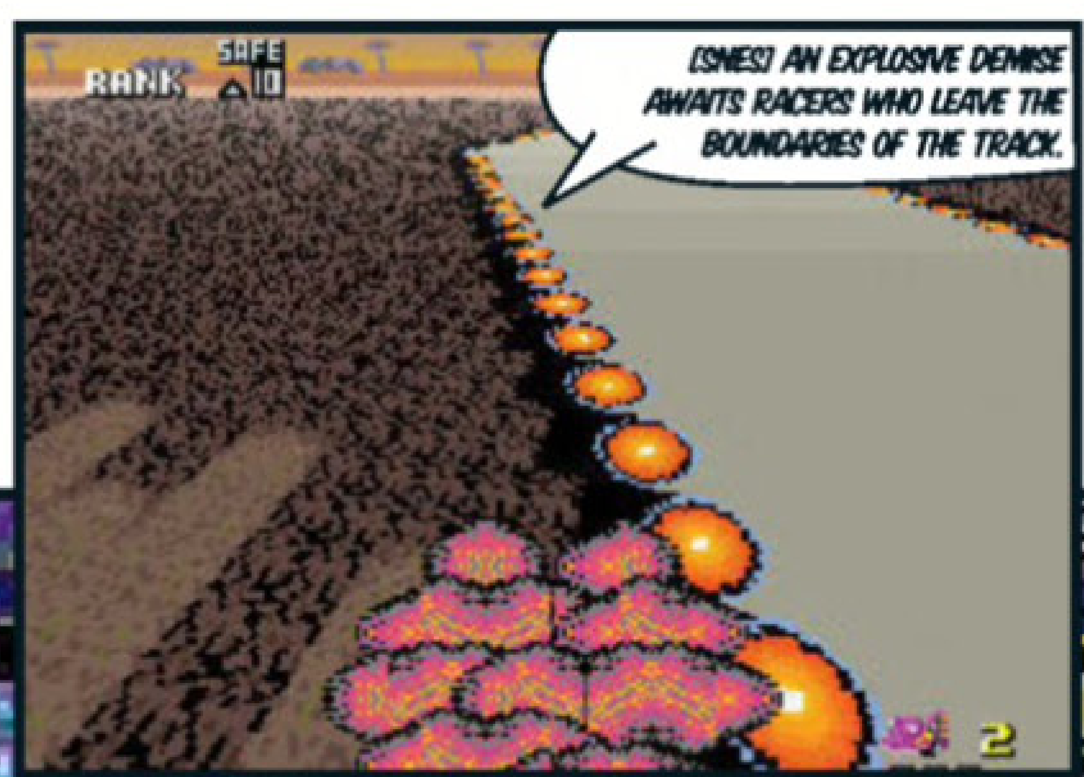
DID YOU KNOW?

■ Mr EAD is named after the Nintendo EAD development team. Appropriately, his craft has stats of E, A and D respectively!

The wait for a true *F-Zero* sequel was a long one, but when *F-Zero X* was released for the N64 in 1998 it proved that the wait was worthwhile. Technological innovations allowed designers to move past the flat tracks of the original game and utilise true 3D track designs for the first time, meaning that players were subjected to loops, corkscrews and jumps, as well as racing through tunnels and on cylindrical courses. Turbo boosts were reworked to consume ship energy, bringing a strong element of risk to races, and a massively increased selection of machines let players to race how they wanted to. The game retains a striking look today, as Nintendo once again traded graphical detail for speed and a high frame-rate. A later expansion kit for the Japan-only 64DD add-on let players to design their own courses, a first for the series.

The Game Boy Advance was the next platform to receive an *F-Zero* game, with development duties falling to Nintendo subsidiary Nd Cube. Set in the year 2585, *F-Zero: Maximum Velocity* featured a new generation of racers piloting all-new machines on exclusive tracks. Despite the theme of renewal the game design was wholly lifted from the SNES original, reverting to progress-based boosts and the elimination race format. Even the visual effect was the same, with the handheld machine going one step further than the SNES by keeping the road and its surrounding scenery on individual layers, heightening the pseudo-3D effect by adding the illusion of depth. The game accompanied the Game Boy Advance at launch in 2001 and received praise from critics, particularly as it included a multiplayer mode.

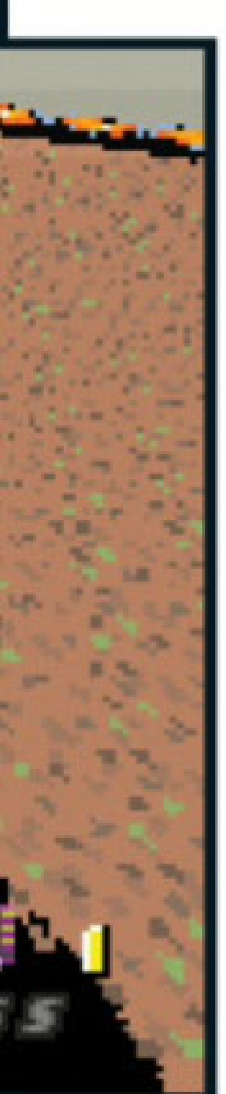
The *F-Zero X* formula was further developed with *F-Zero GX* and *F-Zero AX*, Gamecube and arcade games respectively. The game was the first joint development between ▶



[SNES] AN EXPLOSIVE DEMISE AWAITS RACERS WHO LEAVE THE BOUNDARIES OF THE TRACK.



[SNES] CONGRATULATIONS IF YOU SPOTTED THAT THIS SHOT IS IN FACT FROM THE UPDATED SATELLAVIEW GAME, BS F-ZERO GRAND PRIX.





[N64] EVEN TODAY, F-ZERO X IS AMAZING TO PLAY. IT'S SUPER SLICK, WHILE THERE ARE SOME BREATHTAKING JUMPS TO NEGOTIATE.

▶ former bitter rivals Nintendo and Sega, with the latter's Amusement Vision studio taking charge. *GX* included a story mode for the first time, expanding on the universe of the series with cutscenes, and allowed players to create their own custom machines to race with. *AX* provided straightforward races but boasted exclusive tracks and vehicles, which could be unlocked for play in *GX* by inserting your Gamecube memory card into the arcade cabinet. Both games were visually incredible, marrying the series' trademark speed with detailed 3D visuals. *F-Zero GX* was another critical success, but did receive some criticism for its high difficulty level, while *F-Zero AX* was a rather rare sight in arcades.

The final two games in the *F-Zero* series were developed by Suzak for the Game Boy Advance, and took place in an alternate timeline which followed the events of the animated TV series *F-Zero: GP Legend*. This reboot is set in the year 2201 and follows Ryu Suzaku – or Rick Wheeler, to Western audiences – as he is revived 150 years after a near-fatal crash while in pursuit of the criminal, Zoda. As you'd expect, many existing *F-Zero* characters including Captain Falcon and Black Shadow are drawn into the story as the series progresses.

The first of the tie-in games was itself titled *F-Zero: GP Legend* and boasted a story mode based on the TV show. As with *Maximum Velocity*, the game was based largely on the SNES gameplay model, but it did bring boosting into line with the home console games and drop the elimination aspect of races. Upon release in 2003 critics recognised the quality of gameplay, but felt that it was overly familiar after *Maximum Velocity*. The 2004 follow-up *F-Zero Climax* also suffered from offering few new features, but it did boast improved Mode 7-style visuals and revised gameplay which combined the boost systems of previous games. However, the major improvement was the addition of an integrated track editor, something which hadn't been included as standard in the previous GBA games. Unfortunately *F-Zero Climax* was only released in Japan, meaning that many fans of the series never got to play what is arguably the most refined version of the original formula.

"We sessioned the game almost non-stop for two or three days straight"
Alex Ward

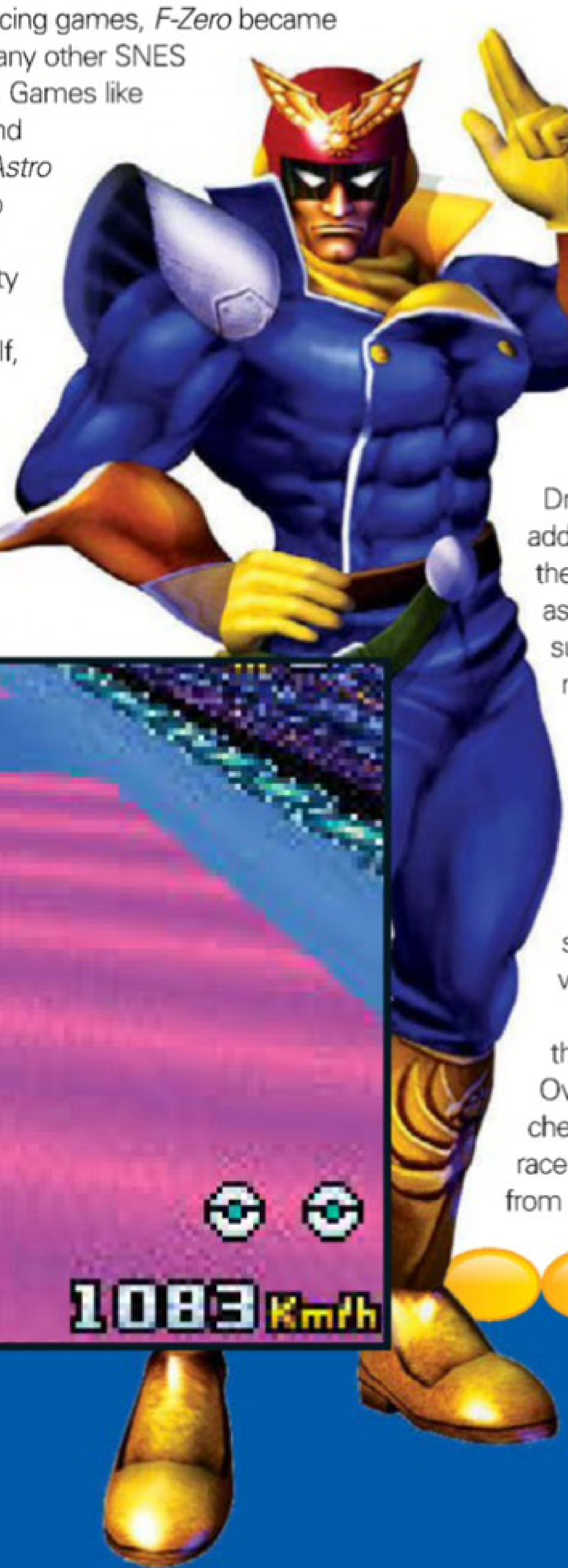
While there hasn't been a new *F-Zero* game since its brief flurry of sequels ended over a decade ago, the series' place in history is secure as its influence extends far beyond its direct lineage. The original game was a powerful demonstration of Mode 7 and it became a signature feature of the SNES, appearing in acclaimed titles such as *Super Mario World* and *Final Fantasy VI*. For racing games, *F-Zero* became the model to which many other SNES racing games adhered. Games like Seta's *Exhaust Heat* and KAZe's *Uchuu Race: Astro Go! Go!* owe a debt to *F-Zero*, and they're far from the only third-party games to do so.

As for Nintendo itself, it wasn't done with developing the use of Mode 7 or fantasy racing games. Nintendo EAD would go on to develop *Super Mario Kart*, another Mode 7 racer which featured simpler tracks but revolutionised the use of hazards by allowing the players to deploy them as weapons. The driving force behind the development of *Super Mario Kart* was to create a game which offered the multiplayer which *F-Zero* had lacked. The fact that this was achieved is a technical feat, which often goes unrecognised as people concentrate their praise on the incredibly addictive qualities of the multiplayer in *Super Mario Kart*.

The longest-lasting part of *F-Zero*'s legacy with Nintendo has been its appealing comic book world. While the series hasn't been revisited as frequently as the likes of *Mario* or *Zelda*, *F-Zero* receives recognition from Nintendo in games such as *Super Smash Bros.*, in which themed stages are commonly included and Captain Falcon is a mainstay. Additionally, the game recently received recognition in the *Mario Kart* series, with the Mute City and Big Blue tracks appearing in *Mario Kart 8* as part of the game's downloadable content offering.

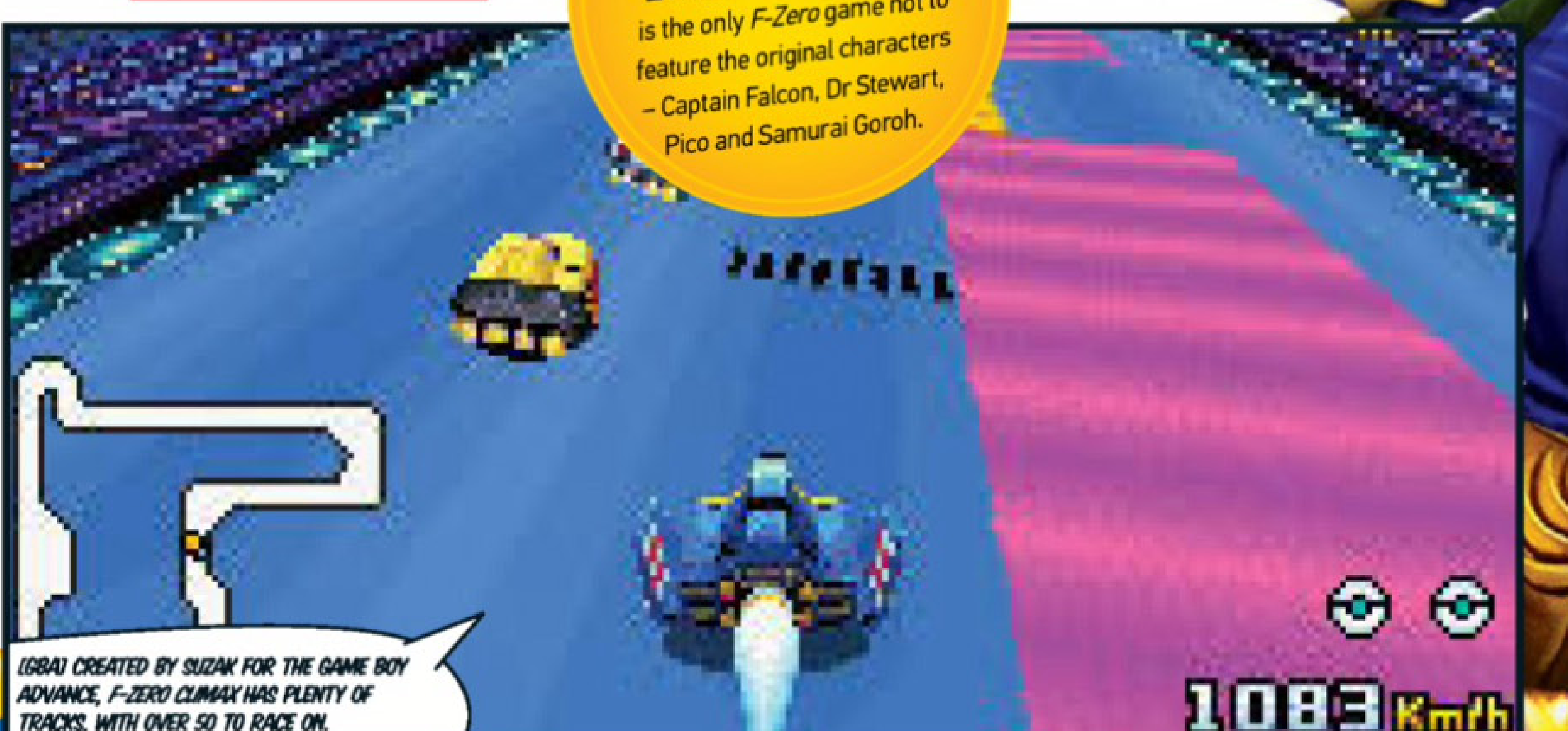
However, it wasn't just Nintendo and its developers that were impacted by *F-Zero*. Technologically, Sega recognised the value of Mode 7 and granted the Mega Drive similar capabilities via the Mega-CD add-on. Games like *BC Racers* often employed the Mega-CD's ability to scale sprites as well as backgrounds, providing trackside details such as trees and houses. While these made for more convincing pseudo-3D environments, games on Sega's hardware struggled to achieve the speed displayed by *F-Zero*. Meanwhile, racing games were established as a key way to launch a platform. Steve contends that *F-Zero* "showed how racers are a brilliant way to showcase hardware, something Namco did with *Ridge Racer* on the PlayStation."

Beyond the technological impact of *F-Zero*, there was its legacy in terms of game design. Over the years, *F-Zero* has been name-checked repeatedly as a variety of futuristic racers have drawn varying degrees of inspiration from Nintendo's game, from the *Extreme-G*



DID YOU KNOW?

■ *F-Zero: Maximum Velocity* is the only *F-Zero* game not to feature the original characters – Captain Falcon, Dr Stewart, Pico and Samurai Goroh.



[GBA] CREATED BY SUZAK FOR THE GAME BOY ADVANCE, F-ZERO CLIMAX HAS PLENTY OF TRACKS, WITH OVER 50 TO RACE ON.

MUTE CITY MELODIES

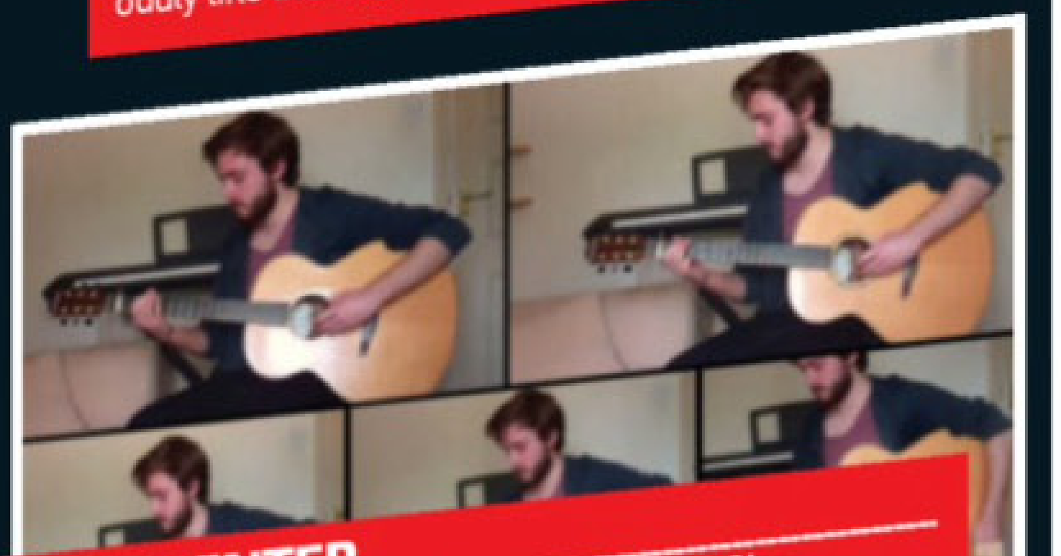
F-Zero's soundtrack has been widely revered and covered – here are some of our favourites



SMOOTH MCGROOVE

www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7nVJbl9bhU

■ We've got a soft spot for Smooth McGroove, and this acapella rendition of the Mute City theme is amongst his best work. The way the vocal tracks are overlaid sounds oddly like the way the SNES plays samples, too.



TOM WINTER

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeKEsgmYg0I

■ With the electric guitar so prevalent in *F-Zero* soundtracks, the idea of an acoustic rendition of the Mute City theme might seem sacrilegious. It actually works out well, though – we'd urge you to give it a listen.



TOXICXETERNITY & MAXIMUMHAMBURGERS

www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f-lza7vOlI

■ This medley is probably the closest to the original game's soundtrack, and covers the SNES soundtrack. It's one of the more elaborate productions out there too.



MUSIC BY PEDRO

www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hXY2nQ20jI

■ Perhaps the most unusual cover on offer here, we love this saxophone rendition of the Mute City theme. Not only is it unique, there's some great freestyle play in the middle of the track which sets it apart from other covers.



[GAMECUBE] WE'RE PRETTY SURE THAT F-ZERO GX REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL FUTURISTIC RACERS THAT HAS EVER BEEN MADE.



[GBA] CREATED BY SUZAK, F-ZERO GP LEGEND IS AN ADAPTATION OF THE ANIME SERIES THAT WAS BASED ON F-ZERO.

series to the likes of *Hi-Octane* and *Cyber Speedway*. Most of these games fell by the wayside quickly, a fact that Valerio attributes to Nintendo's stellar game design. "*F-Zero* works because everything in it works, and every game that tried to follow *F-Zero* and failed because something was missing."

F-Zero is one of the defining influences on its own closest competitor, Sony's *WipEout* series. "Whilst there had been futuristic racers before, *F-Zero* opened the door to many more. Without it there wouldn't be a *WipEout*," asserts Steve. Psygnosis nailed a distinctive formula early on by fusing *F-Zero*'s speed and setting with the weaponry of *Mario Kart*, before adding its own style and 3D visuals. Later games in both series have been known to pinch each other's tricks, from the adoption of attacking moves in *F-Zero X* to *WipEout 2097*'s addition of vehicle destruction and pit lanes.

"Futuristic racers have never struck the goldmine," states Alex, "but then, maybe technology was always holding them back." He's got a point. *F-Zero* has now been absent from our consoles for over a decade, and all of its competitors are dormant. But even with that point made, there's an allure to futuristic racing games that he finds hard to resist. "I remember giving serious thought to having a crack at one after watching *Tron: Legacy* on a transatlantic flight – then scrawling a basic outline out on a napkin," Alex confesses.

That allure holds for Valerio and his team on *Redout*, too. "*F-Zero* was the first to introduce key aspects in terms of visuals and gameplay and it's exactly what we are trying to achieve," he explains. "We pushed the visual contrast to the extreme, blending low poly models with the amazing shaders and visual effects that *Unreal Engine 4* allowed us to create. The driving model is completely physics-based, trying to innovate in a field that has been static since *F-Zero*." For Steve, the series has been a source of inspiration for his own racers."We also took a leaf out of *F-Zero X* and *GX* with the insane 3D track design they have so we'd get our own rollercoaster ride feel."

It's notable that with the sublime *Super Mario World*, Nintendo could have sold the game on the basis of Mode 7 alone. "There are a lot of games nowadays that I like to call 'engine showoff', games where technology is mostly there to sell the licence of the game engine to other companies," Valerio says. "*F-Zero* could have been the same, if they didn't put this much effort into really making a great game. And that's my definition of masterpiece: a perfect union of innovation and design." Masterpiece is an adequate description for a game which, even after 25 years, defines its subgenre and continues to fascinate developers and players alike. "I'd love to work on the *F-Zero* franchise," Steve says. We can see why. As an iconic SNES game, an iconic racing game and an iconic Nintendo world, *F-Zero* boasts a proud heritage. The chance to add to it would be irresistible. *

DID YOU KNOW?

■ At just 770kg, Gomar & Shioh's Twin Noritta is the lightest of all the *F-Zero* craft. Black Shadow's Black Bull is the heaviest at 2340kg.

MEAN MACHINES

The original roster of four vehicles has expanded over the years – just check out this starting grid…



BLUE FALCON
CAPTAIN FALCON
BODY: B ■ BOOST: C ■ GRIP: B
ORIGIN: F-ZERO



GREEN PANTHER
ANTONIO GUSTER
■ BODY: A
■ BOOST: B
■ GRIP: D
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



QUEEN METEOR
MRS ARROW
■ BODY: E
■ BOOST: B
■ GRIP: B
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



IRON TIGER
BABA
■ BODY: B
■ BOOST: D
■ GRIP: A
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



HYPER SPEEDER
BEASTMAN
■ BODY: C
■ BOOST: C
■ GRIP: A
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



MAD WOLF
BILLY
■ BODY: B
■ BOOST: B
■ GRIP: C
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



BIG FANG
BIO REX
■ BODY: B
■ BOOST: D
■ GRIP: A
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



BLACK BULL
BLACK SHADOW
■ BODY: A
■ BOOST: E
■ GRIP: A
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



CRAZY BEAR
DR CLASH
■ BODY: A
■ BOOST: B
■ GRIP: E
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



GOLDEN FOX
DR STEWART
BODY: D ■ BOOST: A ■ GRIP: D
ORIGIN: F-ZERO



MIGHTY TYPHOON
DRAQ
■ BODY: C
■ BOOST: A
■ GRIP: D
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



GREAT STAR
MR EAD
■ BODY: E
■ BOOST: A
■ GRIP: D
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



BLOOD HAWK
BLOOD FALCON
■ BODY: B
■ BOOST: A
■ GRIP: E
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



TWIN NORITTA
GOMAR & SHIOH
■ BODY: E
■ BOOST: A
■ GRIP: C
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



ASTRO ROBIN
JACK LEVIN
■ BODY: B
■ BOOST: D
■ GRIP: A
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



LITTLE WYVERN
JAMES MCCLOUD
■ BODY: E
■ BOOST: B
■ GRIP: B
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



PINK SPIDER
DAI SAN GEN
■ BODY: C
■ BOOST: C
■ GRIP: A
ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



WONDER WASP
JOHN TANAKA
■ BODY: D
■ BOOST: A
■ GRIP: D
ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



RAINBOW PHOENIX
PHOENIX
■ BODY: B
■ BOOST: B
■ GRIP: C
ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



SILVER RAT
DAIGOROH
■ BODY: D
■ BOOST: A
■ GRIP: D
ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



MIGHTY HURRICANE
ROGER BUSTER
- BODY: E
- BOOST: B
- GRIP: B

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



NIGHT THUNDER
SILVER NEELSEN
- BODY: B
- BOOST: A
- GRIP: E

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



KING METEOR
SUPER ARROW
- BODY: E
- BOOST: B
- GRIP: B

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



WHITE CAT
JODY SUMMER
- BODY: C
- BOOST: C
- GRIP: A

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



GROOVY TAXI
PJ
- BODY: B
- BOOST: D
- GRIP: B

ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



SUPER PIRANHA
KATE ALEN
- BODY: B
- BOOST: C
- GRIP: B

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



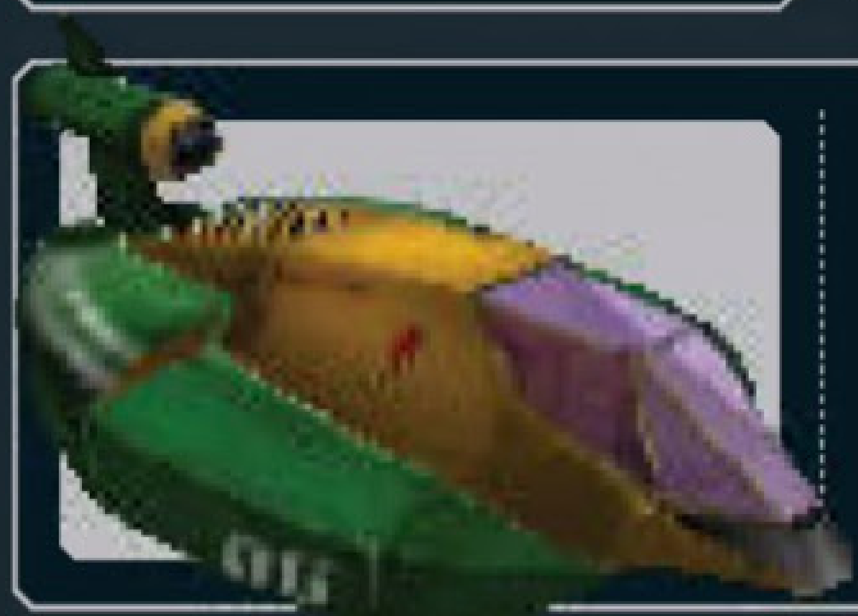
RED GAZELLE
MIGHTY GAZELLE
- BODY: E
- BOOST: A
- GRIP: C

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



DARK SCHNEIDER
DEATHBORN
- BODY: A
- BOOST: B
- GRIP: D

ORIGIN: F-ZERO GX



WILD GOOSE
PICO

BODY: A ▪ BOOST: B ▪ GRIP: C

ORIGIN: F-ZERO

DID YOU KNOW?
■ *F-Zero's* manual claims that Mute City was originally called Mutant City, but in the *GP Legend* story it is said to be the former New York.



SONIC PHANTOM
THE SKULL
- BODY: C
- BOOST: A
- GRIP: D

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



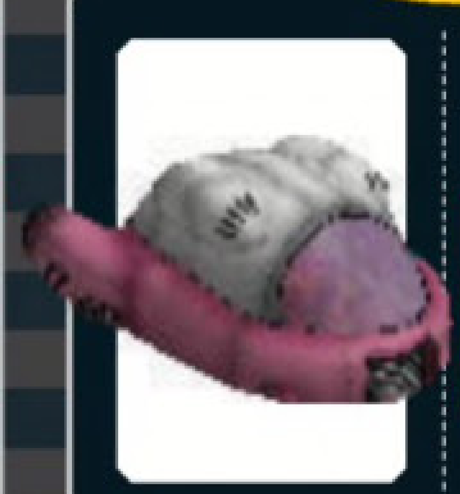
FAT SHARK
DON GENIE
- BODY: A
- BOOST: B
- GRIP: E

ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



SPACE ANGLER
LEON
- BODY: C
- BOOST: C
- GRIP: A

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



BUNNY FLASH
LILY
- BODY: D
- BOOST: B
- GRIP: A

ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



SPARK MOON
PRINCIA
- BODY: B
- BOOST: C
- GRIP: B

ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



DEEP CLAW
OCTOMAN
- BODY: B
- BOOST: B
- GRIP: C

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



ROLLING TURTLE
QQQ
- BODY: A
- BOOST: D
- GRIP: B

ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



WILD BOAR
MICHAEL CHAIN
- BODY: A
- BOOST: C
- GRIP: C

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



MAGIC SEAGULL
SPADE
- BODY: B
- BOOST: A
- GRIP: E

ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



COSMIC DOLPHIN
DIGI-BOY
- BODY: E
- BOOST: A
- GRIP: C

ORIGIN: F-ZERO AX



DEATH ANCHOR
ZODA
- BODY: E
- BOOST: A
- GRIP: C

ORIGIN: F-ZERO X



FIRE STINGRAY
SAMURAI GOROH

BODY: A ▪ BOOST: D ▪ GRIP: B

ORIGIN: F-ZERO

Special thanks to Dan Stephenson for lending us his mint copy of F-Zero and Mark Hogg and Trevor Briscoe for their additional help

Light Phaser

» **PLATFORM:** Master System » **RELEASED:** 1986 » **COST:** £30 (Boxed) - £10 (Unboxed)

When Sega was looking to create an export version of its Japanese Mark III console, it really went to town on localising the experience. As well as changing the name and shape of the system, it created a whole new peripheral aimed at the Western audience – the Light Phaser, a lightgun intended to compete with the NES Zapper. Sega's gun sported a sleek black look to match its host hardware and was well constructed, with good accuracy and a responsive trigger. Much like other contemporary guns, the Light Phaser uses momentary screen flashes to detect hits and misses.

When it launched alongside the Master System in North America, the Light Phaser was initially supported by the pack-in title *Safari Hunt* and a further *Marksman Shooting/Trap Shooting* combo cartridge. The gun also accompanied the console in the rest of the world, but never saw release in the Japanese market as it was incompatible with existing Mark III machines. The gun was supported for a good number of years despite not being released in the console's domestic market,with one or two titles a year trickling out until 1992, when a conversion of Taito's *Space Gun* became the 13th and final Light Phaser title. *







ESSENTIAL GAME
Operation Wolf

While the Light Phaser might not have the recoil action of the arcade cabinet's fixed gun, it does allow players to enjoy a rather excellent version of Taito's shooter, featuring all six stages and between-level cutscenes. In fact, it was so good that it became the bundled game in the Master System II Plus pack. While you can play it with a standard control pad, the gun offers a much better experience – and you can even use both in tandem to allow for grenades to be thrown. *Rambo III* runs it close, but this is our pick for the best Light Phaser game.

Phaser Fact

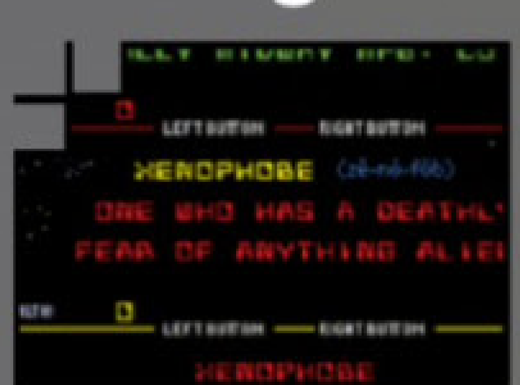
■ In North America, this tip was painted orange during later production runs in order to distinguish the Light Phaser from a real firearm. Some Brazilian models use blue plastic instead.





XENOPHOBE

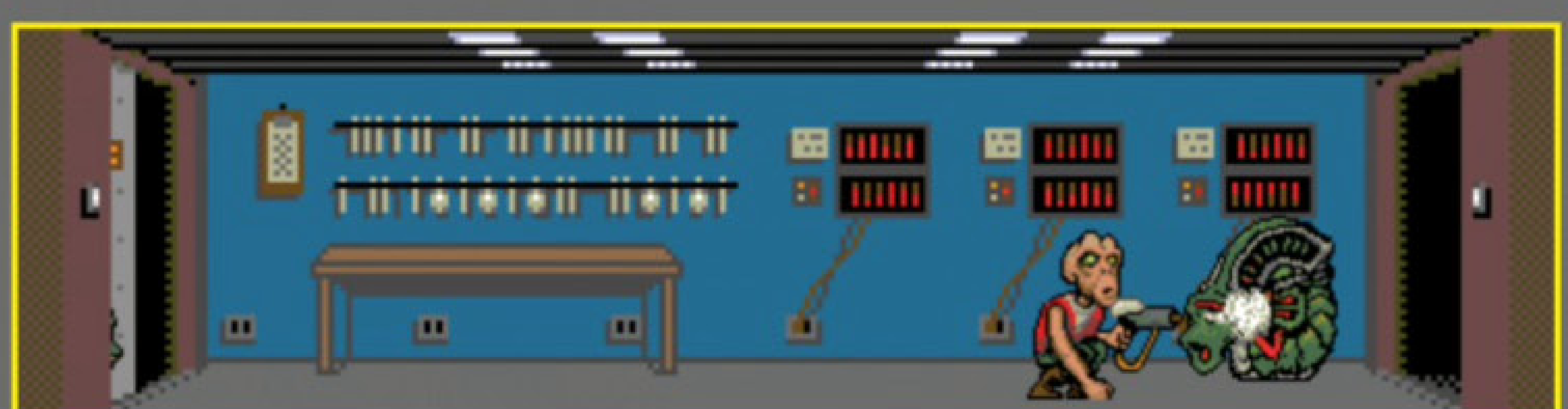
Midway's innovative arcade game is often described as the best game based on the Alien franchise to not carry the name. Kieren Hawken grabs his laser gun to face the aliens with creator, Brian Colin



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** BALLY MIDWAY
- **DEVELOPER:** BALLY MIDWAY
- **RELEASED:** 1987
- **PLATFORM:** ARCADE
- **GENRE:** PLATFORM

The origins of *Xenophobe* actually stems from another Midway coin-op by the same creator, the hugely popular three-player smash fest, *Rampage*. Game designer Brian Colin was always looking to push the boundaries and do something that hadn't been done before as he enthusiastically explains to us. "Prior to creating *Xenophobe*, I had conceived and designed two very different games," he says. "One was a three-player single-screen smasher, *Rampage*, and the other was a single-player multi-screen exploration/adventure game, *Zwackery*. Both were extremely innovative at the time, yet each broke new ground in different ways. Naturally, I wanted to combine what I felt was the best of each into my next project. *Rampage* had proved to us that we could fit three players around a single upright cabinet and the crude, but effective, building destruction animation we developed convinced us that we could 'fake' a side-scrolling effect on Midway's non-scrolling hardware. *Zwackery* had a unique control configuration that gave players a much wider range of options than the typical shooter game. So we started to think about combining these features."



» [Arcade] The Puffer Gun is effective from short range but rubbish from anywhere else.

Pushing boundaries and innovating clearly became the main concept of the game, rather than the actual *Aliens* theme that surrounded it. So we had to ask Brian how that came about and did James Cameron's 1986 box office smash have any influence on it? "The theme was definitely secondary," he explains. "The inspiration for the game, as with many of my games back then, was more about doing something that other people said couldn't be done.



Originally, I conceived this game with a treasure hunting theme set in 19th century Egypt, but when Midway assigned a novice programmer and avid science fiction fan Howard Shere to the project, he suggested that we use a more contemporary theme. We were all huge fans of a new sci-fi horror movie called *Aliens* so shifting the setting into space seemed ideal."

So with the design set in place, the next part of the process, as with any arcade game, was to figure out what the cabinet will look like and what features will need to be included.

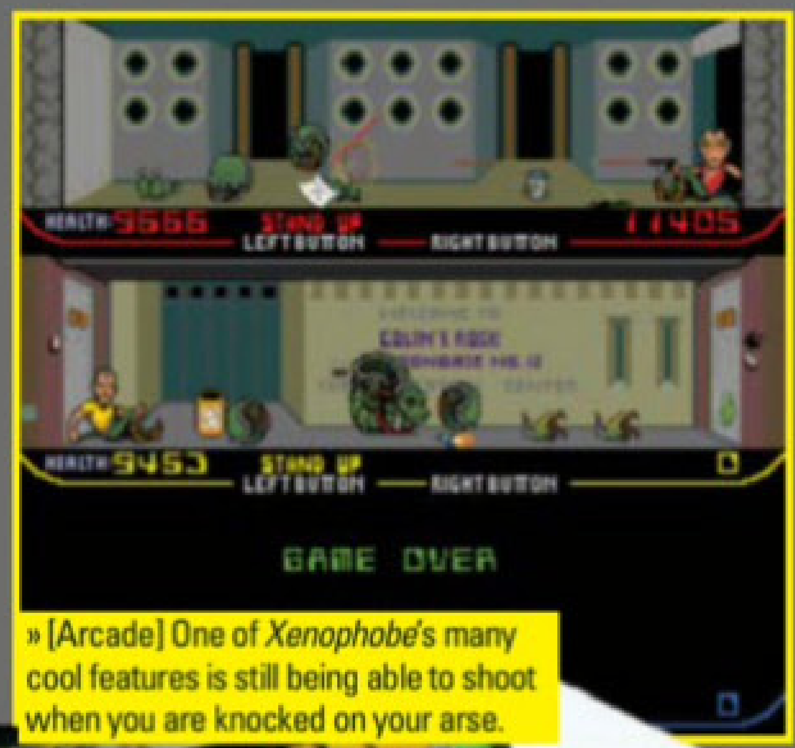
Xenophobe needed a unique cabinet that was designed around it's innovative features. Brian had a great deal of say in just how that would turn out. "While 'conventional wisdom' held that multiplayer adventure games required multiple keyboards and monitors, which was obviously prohibitive in the arcade days, due to both the manufacturing cost and space considerations, I set out to create an action game that would allow multiple players the freedom to simultaneously explore a huge environment on a single monitor," Brian explains. So it's clear that the multiplayer aspect of *Xenophobe* was to become its key feature.

"Absolutely," remarks Brian. "I've always believed that simultaneous multiplayer play is a much more rewarding experience for all concerned, which is why the vast majority of my games are designed to be played with friends and strangers alike. To my mind, a well-designed multiplayer arcade game is still the best social experience there is!"

With the designs for both the game and the cabinet set in place it then became the job of the people working on it to decide just how the game was going to look. As well as being the game's designer, Brian was also the artist, so the colourful cartoony visuals of *Xenophobe* was all his own work as ▶

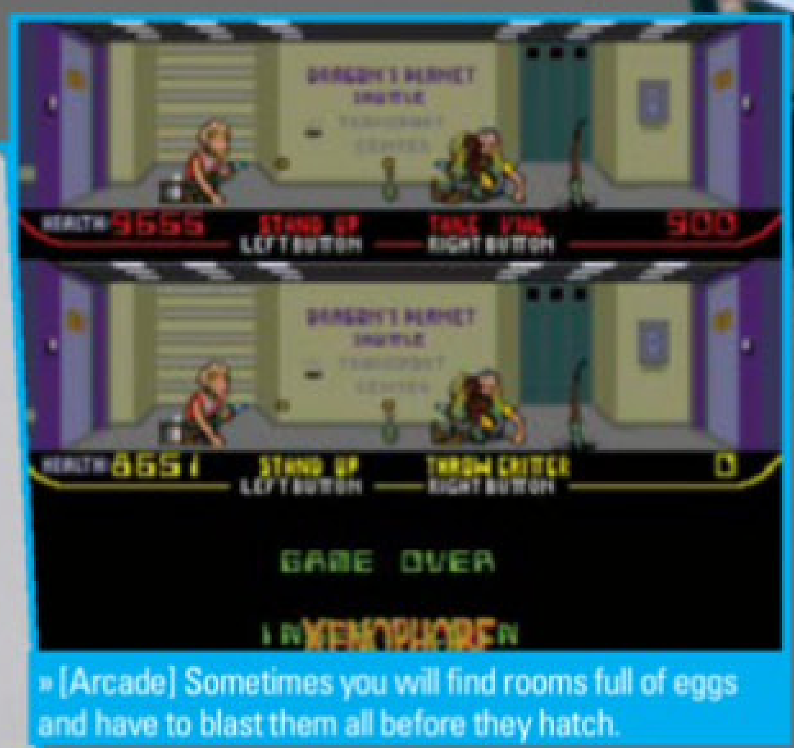


» [Arcade] Snotterpillars will rise up and spit energy zapping acid at you.



» [Arcade] One of *Xenophobe*'s many cool features is still being able to shoot when you are knocked on your arse.





» [Arcade] Sometimes you will find rooms full of eggs and have to blast them all before they hatch.

» The audio cassette containing a recording of the Amiga music that was included with Microprose's 8-bit computer versions of the game.



ECOLOGY OF AN ALIEN

POD



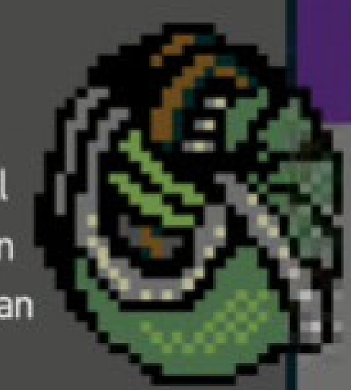
■ If left, this oozing egg will hatch into a critter. They can be taken out quickly with a single blast of your weapon.

CRITTER



■ Clearly based on the Face Huggers we know and love from the *Alien* franchise, these annoyances will cling onto you if you don't kill them first.

ROLLERBABY

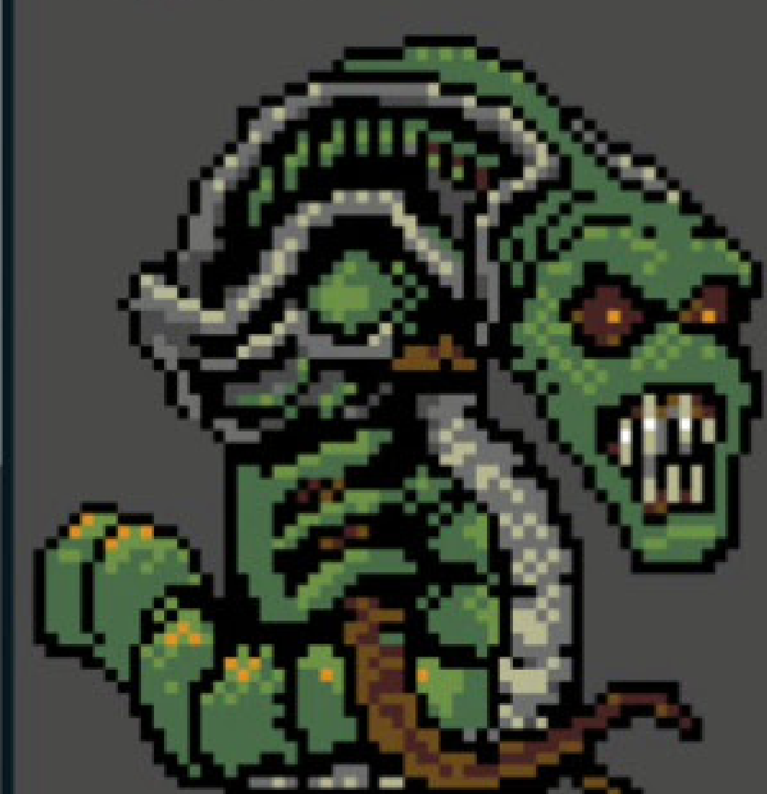


■ These thick skinned armadillo-like Xenos will roll into you and knock you down before opening up to reveal an ugly alien hidden inside.

TENTACLE



■ Watch your head! These alien appendages will reach through doors, walls and ceilings and squeeze the life out of you if you let them!



SNOTTERPILLAR

■ The big daddy of Xenophobe, these huge aliens will also look familiar to fans of the *Alien* films and they spit vile life-draining acid right in your face.

FESTOR



■ Also known as Door Monsters, these are probably the hardest Xenos to kill. They will peep round entrances and shoot you with their deadly laser eyes.

CONVERSION CAPERS



ATARI LYNX

■ Gil Colgate's excellent Lynx version not only includes everything from the arcade game, but also contains a host of extra content including an excellent four-player Comlynx mode.

NES

■ The NES version was converted by SunSoft and retains the split-screen experience but with weedy sprites and lack of colour, as a result, it is one of the weaker home conversions.



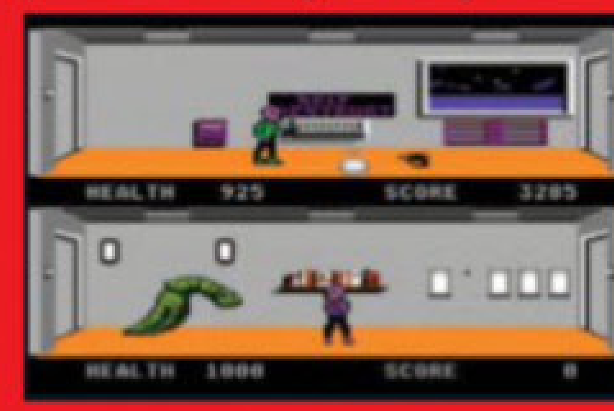


ATARI 2600

■ This was one of the very last 2600 games to be produced by Atari. It does a brave job of replicating the arcade game and the basic gameplay is there, but it does suffer from blocky visuals.

ATARI 7800

■ The Atari ProSystem received the best home console port of this game. It doesn't suffer from the flicker or muted colours of the rival NES version and the split-screen mode works perfectly. The only minor niggle is the poor sound throughout the game.



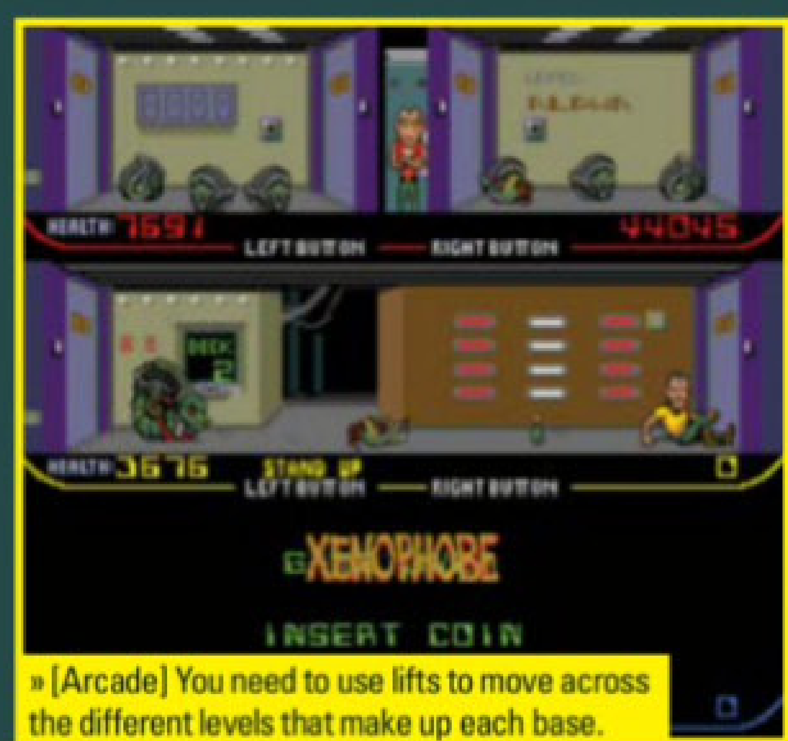


SINCLAIR SPECTRUM

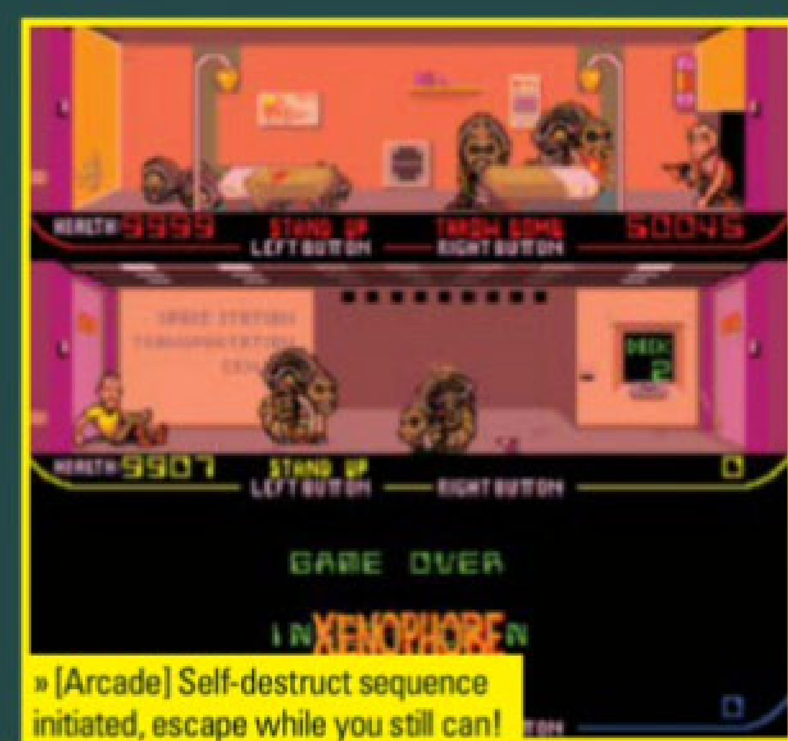
■ This conversion is a superb effort at replicating the coin-op, albeit in monochrome form. It packs everything else in with the multiplayer gameplay intact.

he was quick to point out. "I was responsible for all of the game's art, including the sprites, animation and even the cabinet graphics. The absurdity of the characters, the aliens, the bad puns and cheesy animated effects are the result of me having a lot of fun while doing my job!" It soon became clear to us that enjoying himself was a key part of the whole process of designing an arcade game for Brian. "I'm a cartoonist, probably because I enjoy finding the fun in the world around me," he smiles. "I've been fortunate because it seems that if I'm making myself smile while I'm creating something, the joy that I'm feeling carries over into the product and ultimately the smile ends up on the face of the player. This attitude undoubtedly affects my basic design philosophy, too. I believe that games should be, first and foremost, fun. I remember back in the arcade days we had to make sure that players felt good enough about a game that they would reach into their pocket for another quarter after every loss."

The finished design of *Xenophobe* was a multiplayer arcade adventure that sneaked in elements from other genres such as run-and-gun-style shoot-'em-ups and space exploration games. The player got to choose



» [Arcade] You need to use lifts to move across the different levels that make up each base.



» [Arcade] Self-destruct sequence initiated, escape while you still can!

from a selection of characters and explore each space station however they wished, and thanks to the triple spilt-screen gameplay each player was able to go their own way. The basic premise of each level was exactly the same: to rid the space station of all the alien Xenos within a time limit. If you failed to do this, a self-destruct sequence would be initiated and you would have to escape before it blew up. Each player had a limited amount of health and would start with a weapon that was often referred to as a 'pea shooter'. While exploring, you could pick up better weapons, and, also, some handy grenades that were great for clearing rooms packed with Xenos. The enemies in the game were diverse and would also evolve as the game went on increasing the challenge.

The originality and diverse nature of *Xenophobe* won it many plaudits at the time, Brian was very keen to make the game as deep as possible and is happy to go into more detail about the origins of this. "I'm dating myself here, but as every *Zork*-loving text adventurer knows, part of the fun of any exploration game is the ability to discover and collect random items that can be used elsewhere in a variety of unexpected ways. *Xenophobe* used a modified *Gorf* handle that featured a trigger and two thumb buttons that would do a host of different things depending on where you were standing, what you were doing and/or what you had previously collected. As players moved their characters around the space stations their status bar would reflect changes in thumb button functionality. So in addition to the kinds of laser shooting, grenade tossing action one would expect in an arcade game, this game allowed players to interact with their surrounding in more subtle, but often surprising ways. There were many options available to the player at different times and places, but the player wouldn't really know what would happen until the button was

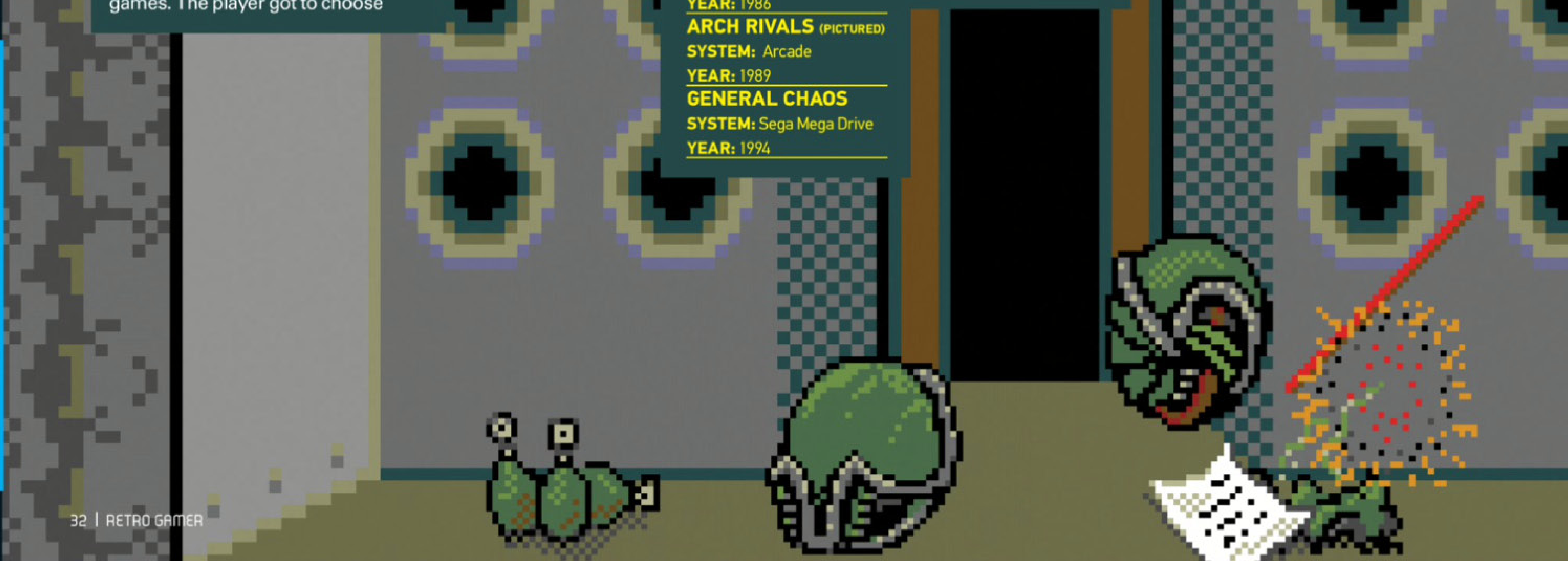


DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

RAMPAGE
SYSTEM: Arcade
YEAR: 1986

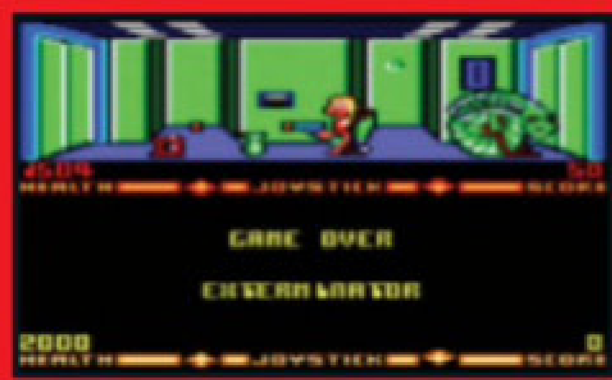
ARCH RIVALS (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: Arcade
YEAR: 1989

GENERAL CHAOS
SYSTEM: Sega Mega Drive
YEAR: 1994



COMMODORE 64

■ Another excellent 8-bit conversion, the C64 version is well-known for it's superb soundtrack. The game also plays at an impressive speed, even in multiplayer mode, and it manages to pack in everything that made Midway's arcade game so great.





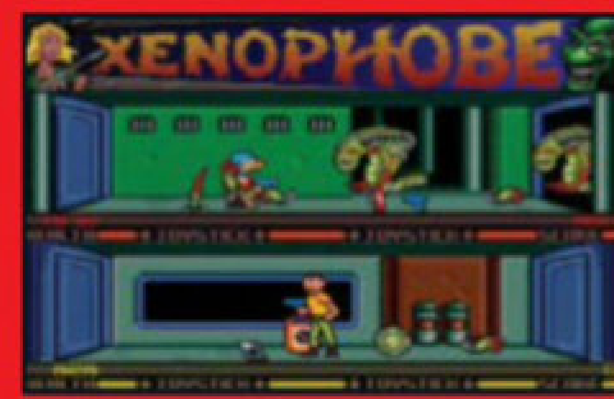
AMSTRAD CPC

■ Unlike the lazy Spectrum port, Imagitec went all out with this ultra colourful CPC version. Thankfully, it includes the great music from its Speccy cousin, but all the graphics have been redrawn and it looks absolutely gorgeous.

ATARI XE

■ The Atari 8-bit port is very similar to the 7800 version, but this is no surprise given it was programmed by Blue Sky Software. The only differences come in the smaller colour palette and improved POKEY sound.





COMMODORE AMIGA

■ The Amiga version of *Xenophobe* is a close approximation of the arcade game. As good as the game looks and as well as it plays, Barry Leitch's soundtrack is pure joy, you won't hear much better on the machine.

ATARI ST

■ The ST version is pretty similar to the Amiga iteration in many ways. The graphics are near identical and it plays exactly the same. The main difference is in the music, which has been converted for the YM chip.



pushed. These simple options could affect the alien onslaught, which was a pretty radical idea at the time, but I was convinced that adding some simple puzzle and strategy elements to the standard arcade shoot-'em-up would give the game greater appeal."

Sadly many of the elements of the game that Brian wanted to implement never made the final cut. "By design every object in the game was created to be used by the player in one way or another, but not everything made it into the game," he explains. "Ironically, the game earned so much money during its initial weeks of testing that management decided the game was good enough and the programmer was pulled off the game to go work on a pinball project. I was disappointed and argued against going into production, but it's hard to argue with money. So while most items that the player discovers can be used in some manner, many of them were designed to have multiple functions, but were only partially implemented. Seed packets, for example, could be picked up, but had no additional value. Yet players would be allowed to plant seeds in certain locations, which would sprout into food. Conceptually, there were primary, and sometimes even secondary and tertiary uses for almost every item or background element." But these other features wouldn't be completely lost as when coding began on the Atari Lynx conversion, programmer Gil Colgate reinstated some of them. "At that time in my career I had only done ports," he explains. "I wanted to make each port better than the original, so I thought it would be a fun idea to implement them. I was the only programmer on the project, and there were no committees of producers to sway, so I did it. With some design decisions, like the idea to use a jet pack, I needed to make sure there were vertical shafts to use it in. Nowadays, if you think of an idea like a jet pack, you will find out that the art department won't have time to change the levels to use it and much more planning is required and a lot less improvisation." Brian himself approved of this and was a big fan of Gil's work. "The Lynx port really was terrific and among the best-looking conversions of its day," he elates.

As we already alluded to, *Xenophobe* ended up being successful for Midway but it's perhaps not as well remembered as some of Brian's other games. "When released, *Xenophobe* set new arcade industry earnings records; earning more per week than the previous record breaker, *Rampage*," Brian proudly exclaims before adding, "however, the earnings dropped off dramatically after several months. For some reason it didn't have the legs that *Rampage* had over time. Did the game's popularity subside because we didn't give players enough to do and discover? Or is it that more players prefer the comfortable simplicity of mindless destruction? The world may never know." What we do know is that *Xenophobe* remains a highly playable and still very unique arcade game experience that deserves all the acclaim it receives. Brian now runs his own company called Game Refuge producing titles for a wide variety of different formats, so would he ever consider making a sequel to finally implement all the features he had to miss out? "I'd love to, but sadly, I was a Midway employee when I designed *Xenophobe*, so I don't own the rights to the game. But if all of the *Xenophobe* fans out there get together and acquire the rights someday, I would love to help make another game a reality!" ★

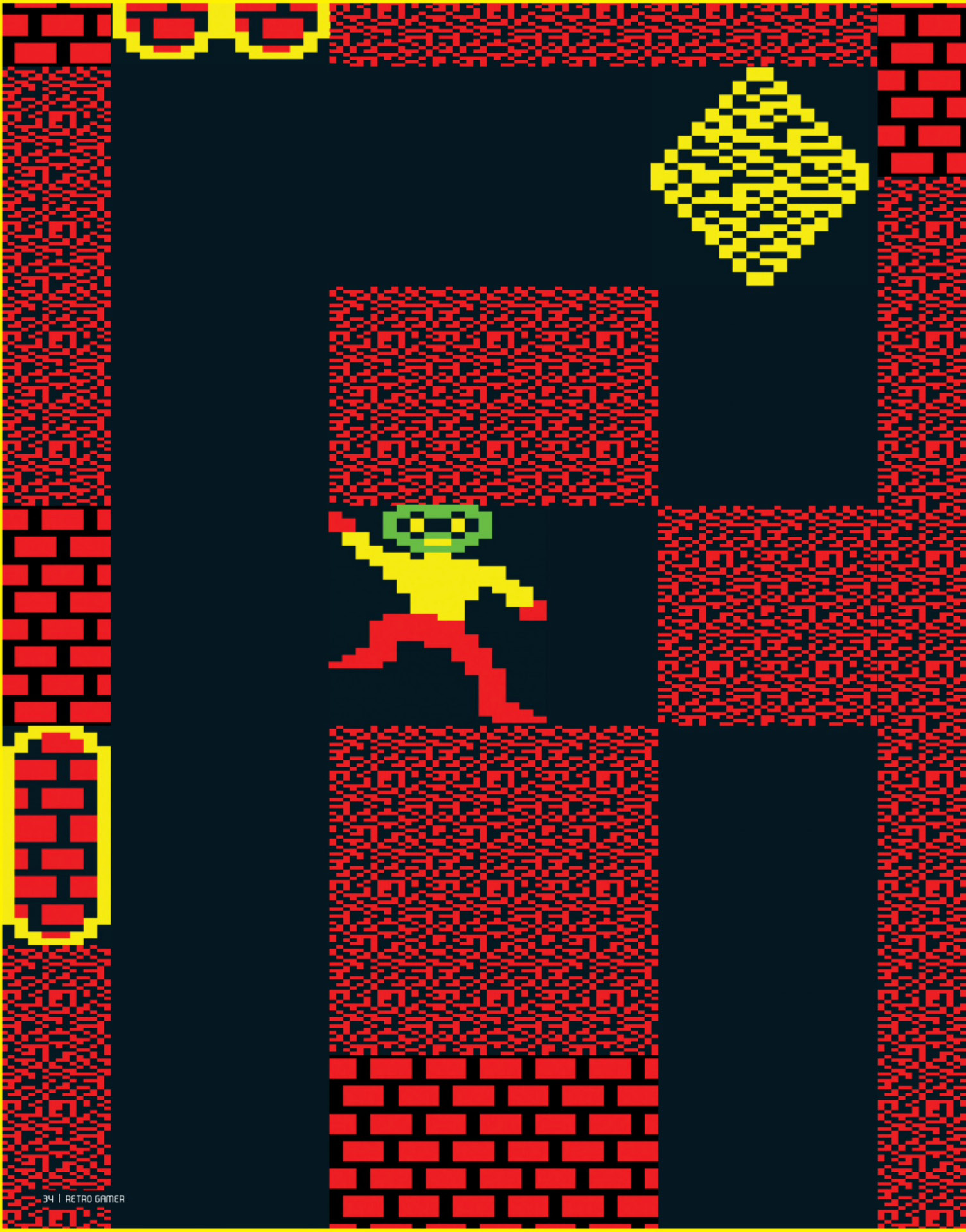
Special thanks to Brian Colin and Gil Colgate for their memories.



» [Arcade] Handy monitors on the wall tell you the level of the Xeno infestation.

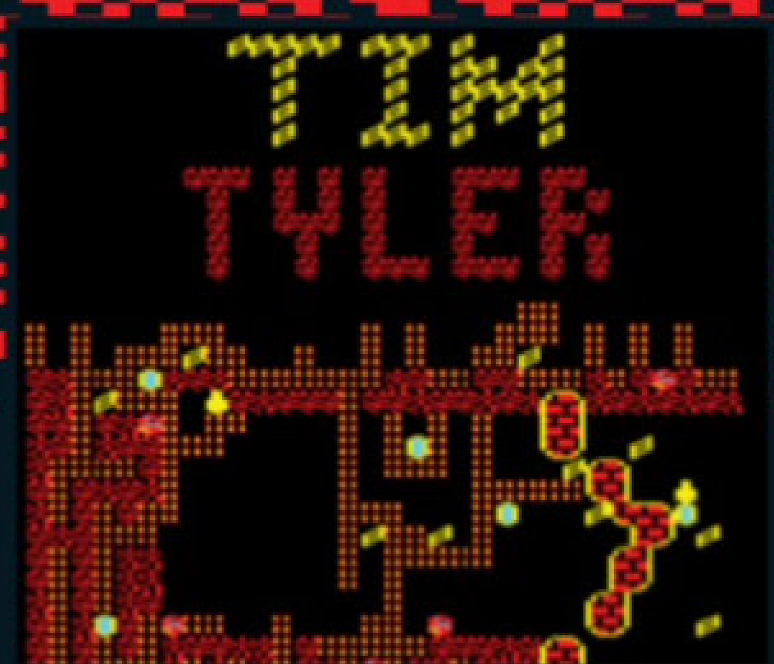


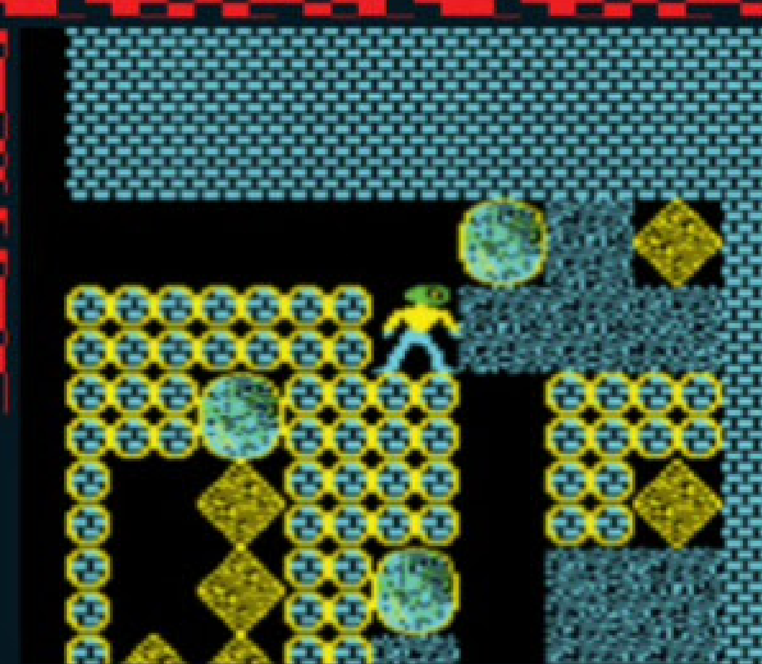
» [Arcade] Failing to clear a base of the Xenos will trigger a fatal explosion.



THE HISTORY OF REPTON

To the sound of jaunty ragtime music a sharply-dressed lizard heads down underground in search of untold riches. Now, precisely thirty years on, Martyn Carroll speaks to key known associates to discover what grand adventures befell the intrepid Repton





Imagine a row of BBC Micros at an after-hours school computer club where gaming is permitted. At one end you've got *Elite* and its absorbing union of strategy and simulation, while at the other end there's *Chuckie Egg* and its platforming antics. Somewhere in the middle of the row, figuratively speaking, would be *Repton*.

Written by Tim Tyler when he was only just 16-years-old, *Repton* was a thinking man's arcade game. Ostensibly a *Boulder Dash* clone, *Repton* was more measured. It wasn't a *Rockford*-style gem dash – you had to study the map of each cavern and carefully plot the best path to collect every diamond without being crushed by a rock, eaten by an alien or trapped by your own stupidity.

Repton wasn't a straight rip of *Boulder Dash*, however, and there's a convincing reason for that. "I never actually played *Boulder Dash*," explains Tim, "and haven't done so to this day. I read a review of the game in a magazine which directly inspired me to create *Repton*. The review was positive and featured pictures, however the pictures seemed to show relatively boring game scenes. From the pictures I thought it ought to be possible to make a more intellectually challenging version, crammed with dense puzzles. There wasn't much like that on the BBC computer at the time. It seemed as though it was an interesting niche."

Besides providing the impetus for *Repton*, Tim also has the computer press to thank for getting him interested in games in the first place. "It started with the magazines. Then my friends got computers, and I could see how cool the games were. It was obvious that these ▶

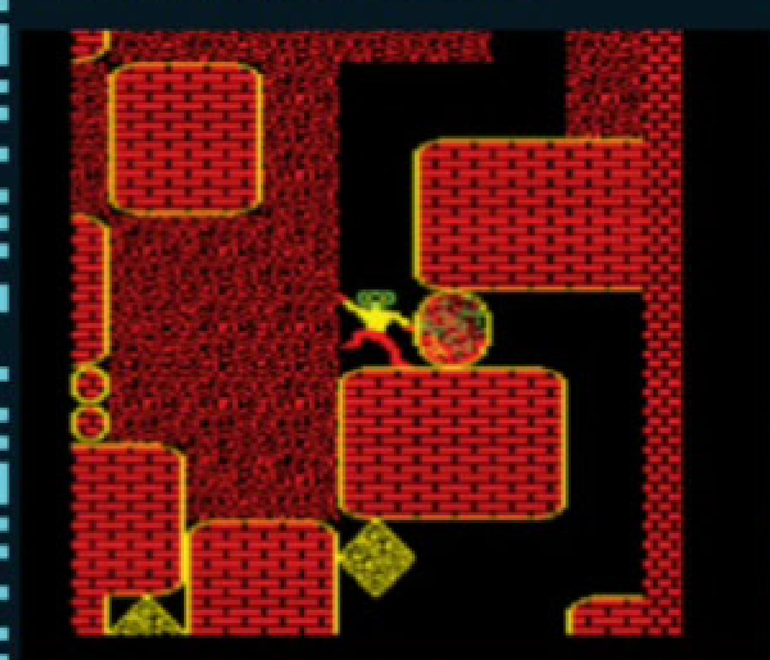
were cool gadgets and I wanted one. I persuaded my relatives that computers were educational. They put up £200, I put up £200, and soon after I had a BBC Model B."

So what was it about the Acorn machine? "I picked the best computer I could find and afford, and never really looked back," Tim says. "It was pretty good. I was grateful for the sensible video memory map, the decent audio and the hardware scrolling. It would probably be churlish of me to complain years later about the lack of tools and the wobbly sideways RAM."

Although still at school, Tim wasted little time in getting to grips with the Beeb. "I was a fairly geeky kid and I quickly got the hang of programming it. My grandfather should probably get some credit for my problem-solving skills. He was a physics lecturer at a local college and he encouraged me to pursue maths and science-related subjects. Programming was fun and seemed like a possible source of profit. I wrote *Moon Cycle* with a friend and it got published. Then I quickly wrote *Cosmic Debris* and *Pink*. Both were rejected by publishers. *Pink* was a scrolling platformer which featured a pink panther in an underground cavern collecting diamonds. Retrospectively, the parallels to *Repton* seem obvious."

> "I never actually played Boulder Dash, and haven't done so to this day"
>
> Repton creator Tim Tyler

If *Moon Cycle* doesn't sound familiar that's because it was released as *BMX On The Moon* – a less credible, though more marketable, title. The game was released by Superior Software in 1984, and it was the popular Acorn publisher that snapped up *Repton* the following year. Superior's Richard Hanson was impressed, though not shocked, that this potential hit had been created by a schoolboy. "Around the time there had been a number of press articles about successful teenage game coders, such as Eugene Evans at Imagine Software," he explains. "In fact, many developers were young, so I wasn't really surprised about Tim's age. Certainly Tim was very talented and I was very impressed by the quality of the original *Repton* game we received from him."



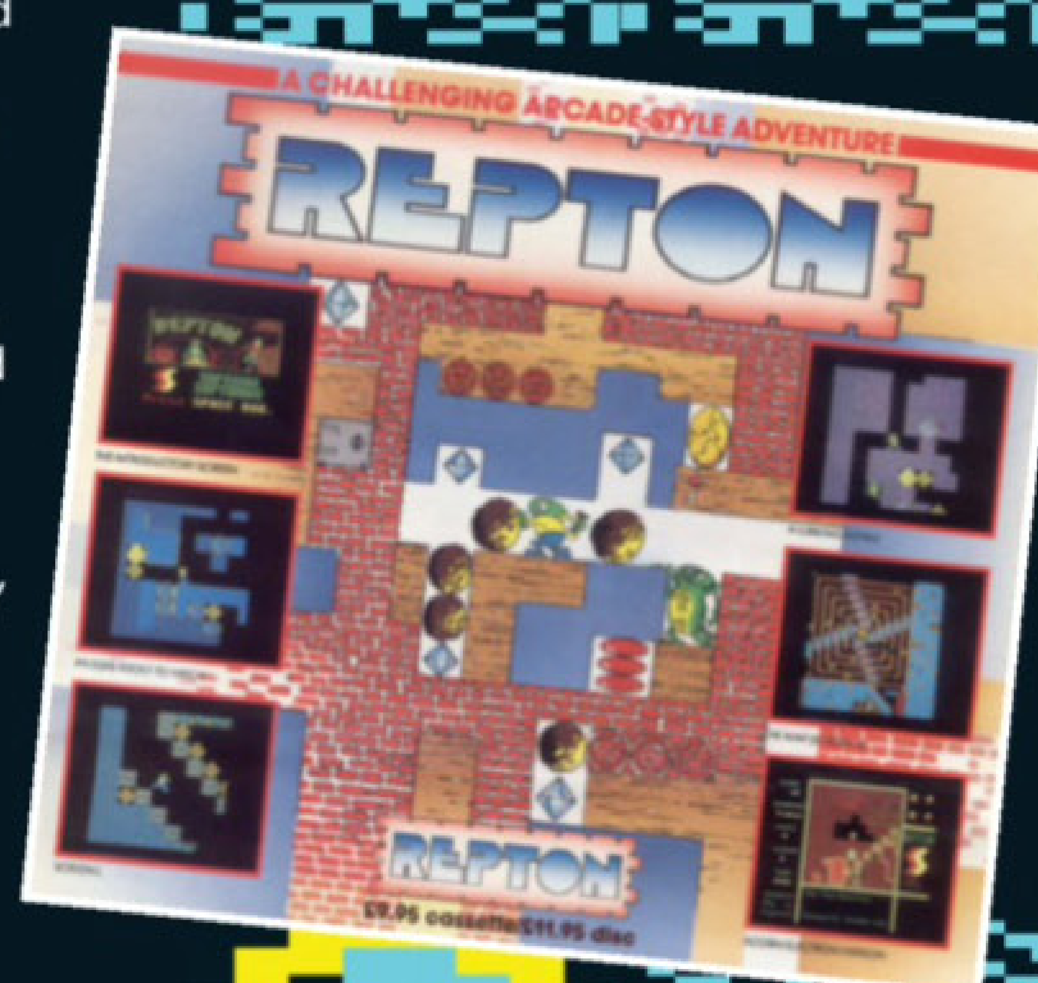
» [BBC Micro] *Repton*'s first dilemma – push this impeding rock or leave it be?



» Tim Tyler created *Repton* when he was 15.



Thankfully Superior refrained from renaming the game (otherwise we might be talking about *Gecko In A Grotto* right now). The publisher did make one astute suggestion, though, and that was to add a password feature. The game featured 12 screens and some of the later ones – such as the eleventh screen, the frenetic 'Giant Clam' – were pretty tough so it was a blessing not having to start over each time.



Superior's marketing manager Chris Payne commissioned a graphic designer to create artwork for the game, with the instruction to emphasise the *Repton*'s resemblance to *Boulder Dash*. The strategy worked and helped propel *Repton* to success, becoming Superior's best-selling title. *Repton* was a critical triumph, too. "Buy it today," encouraged Philip Tudor when reviewing the Electron version in *Electron User* magazine, "this is an astounding game reaching new heights in Electron arcade adventures."

TRULY SUPERIOR SOFTWARE

Defining BBC Micro games from Superior Software

CITADEL 1985



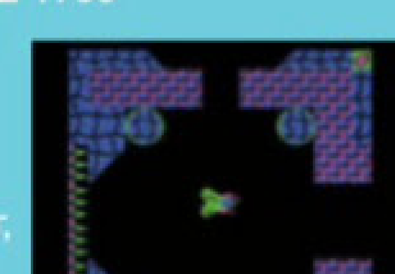
■ This was one of the early titles where Superior really lived up to its name. It looked like a simple platformer, but it was actually a sprawling, puzzle-packed adventure spread out over more than 100 screens. The best arcade adventure ever? Superior claimed so on the box, and in terms of the BBC library, it was hard to argue.

THRUST 1986

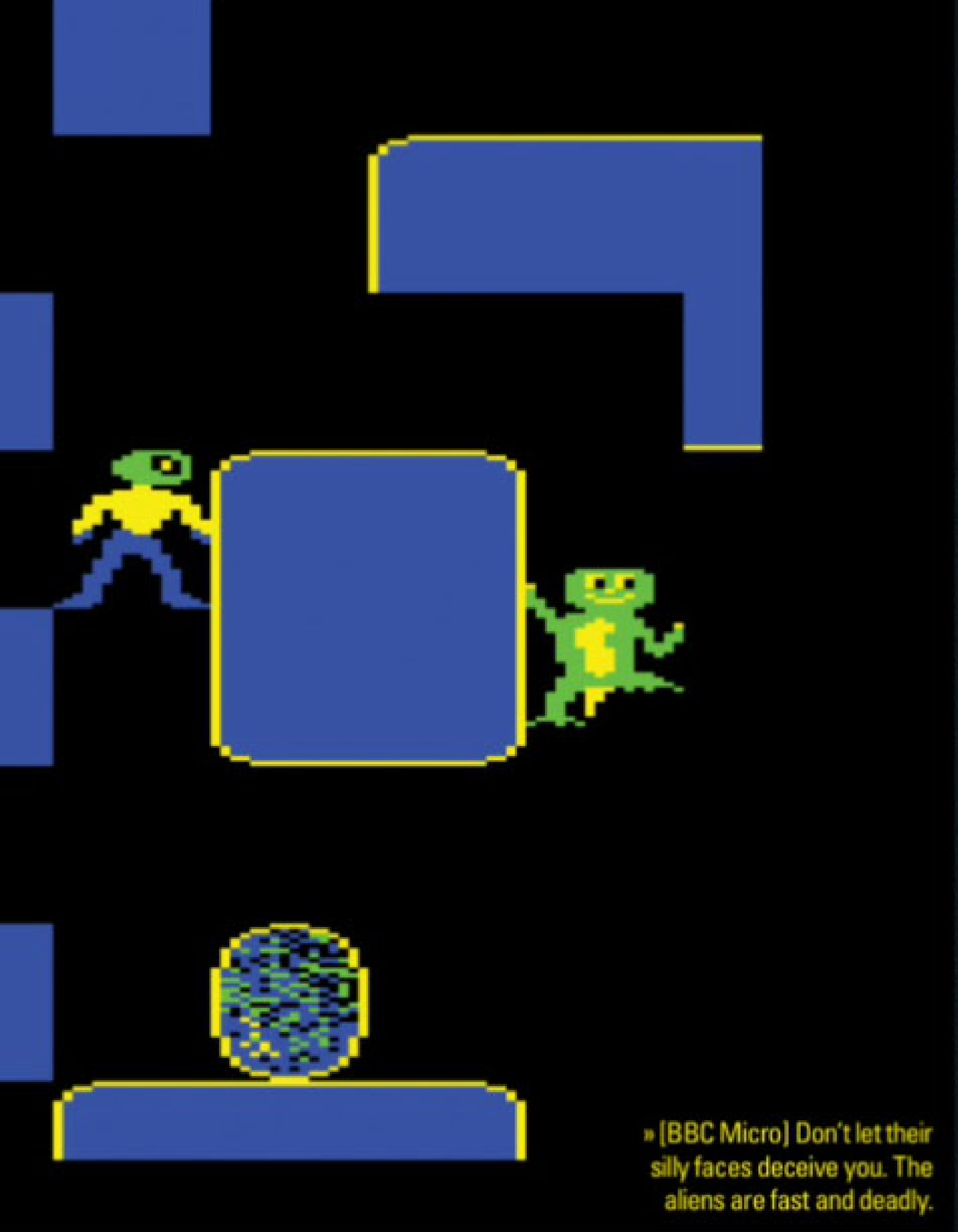


■ One of the all-time classics and it began life on the BBC and Electron, courtesy of programmer Jeremy Smith and Superior Software. Grappling with gravity was tough and required patience – certain death was never more than a few pixels away – but escaping with the pod on the later levels was a joyous feat. Physics is fun? You bet.

RAVENSKULL 1986



■ Choosing to play as one of four character types (Adventurer, Warrior, Wizard or Elf), Ravenskull invited gamers to enter an old castle and gather up the parts of a crucifix. The game was massive, with four levels of the castle to explore, but the top-down graphics meant that discovering its hidden depths was never a chore.



» [BBC Micro] Don't let their silly faces deceive you. The aliens are fast and deadly.

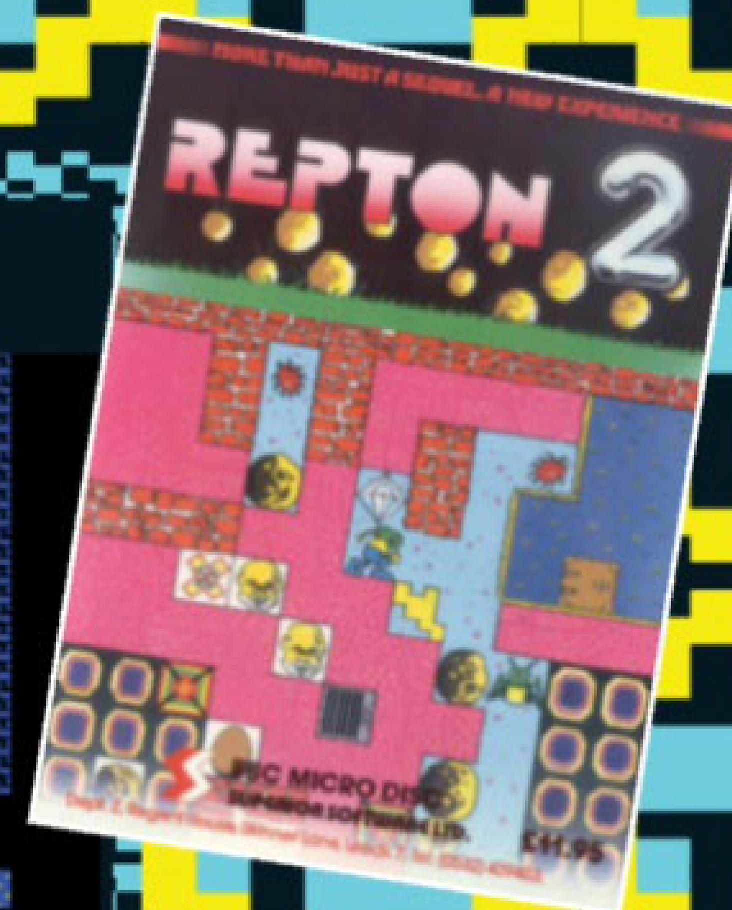
Tim deliberately introduced the extra challenges following feedback that the first game too easy. "I saw it as a way to create a bigger and harder game that was less likely to be solved quickly. I expect it was quite frustrating to play after a while. On the other hand, there was a prize."

Prizes were something Superior became well known for and it all began with the original *Repton*, where a prize of £100 was offered to the first person to complete the game without using passwords. "Chris Payne had suggested the idea of competitions beforehand, and *Repton* seemed ideal for a competition," Richard recalls. "Superior continued to run competitions for several games that we later published." For *Repton 2* the prize value increased, with the first 100 people to complete the game awarded a t-shirt and entered into a £200 draw. Unfortunately there was a problem – a glitch meant that one of the diamonds was unobtainable and the game couldn't be completed. Mere mortals had little hope of getting to the end anyway, but the prize drew attention to the error and Superior had to issue a fixed version.

That unfortunate blunder aside, Richard has no complaints about the sequel. "I was very happy with

» [BBC Micro] *Repton 2* was tough. These skulls on the opening screen were a portent.





Repton 2 and the feedback from players was generally positive. The extra game ideas – such as spirits, cages and transporters – added interesting new aspects to the gameplay." Unsurprisingly the game was another commercial and critical success. "*Repton 2* is better than anything I've played on the BBC Micro or Electron," raved Bruce Smith in *Acorn User*. The sequel was a clear advancement over the original and this was emphasised when the two games were ported to the ZX Spectrum and released in 1989 as a double pack, titled *Repton Mania*. Awarding the release 88%, *Your Sinclair* was clear where the real substance lay. "[*Repton 2*] is one of the most compulsive games I've played in months," wrote reviewer Marcus Berkmann. "Use *Repton* to get you used to the controls and the gameplay, then leap straight in at the deep end and load up *Repton 2*. That's not to underestimate *Repton* but *Repton 2* is the business."

Following the success of the sequel another *Repton* game was almost mandatory, but Tim wasn't interested in taking another trip to the coalface. "I'd had enough of maths and computer science," he says, "and wanted to do something with my life that involved other people." In ▶

Striking while the iron was hot, Superior approached Tim for a sequel and he wasted little time in bashing out *Repton 2*. The original took just a month to write, the sequel a took just a month and a half. "I did work fast," he says. "However, I should have written a level editor and by skipping that step,I wasted quite a bit of time entering the levels by hand. Since then I've grown more appreciative of the need for suitable tools." The sequel was released in November 1985, around six months after the original, and the keyword was 'more'.

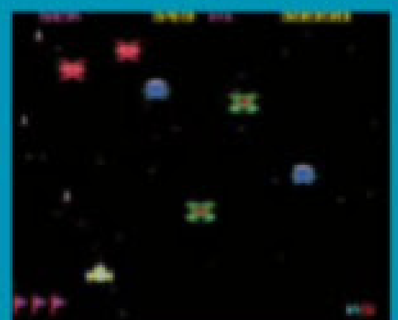
"More screens, more puzzles, more adversaries: more than just a sequel," ran the teaser advert. If the advert had been honest then it would have added 'more punishingly difficult', because beneath its familiar exterior lay a different beast. Instead of separate screens, the sequel took place in one giant cavern and you had to use transporters to travel from one area to another. This open structure meant that a password system wasn't feasible, so the game had to be completed in one long sitting. To compound matters, in order to finish the game you not only had to grab every diamond (all 1,634 of them), but also collect 4,744 pieces of earth, locate 42 jigsaw pieces and satisfy other completion conditions.



» [BBC Micro] The handy map feature allows you to plot the best route through the caverns.

GALAFORCE 1986

■ The BBC was home a number of arcade shooters, all bursting with the machine's garish hues. The one was based on the *Galaxian* series, as you might have guessed, and it delivered on all counts, being fast and responsive. There were loads of zones to blaze through and if you wanted more, Superior released a sequel in 1988.



ELITE 1986

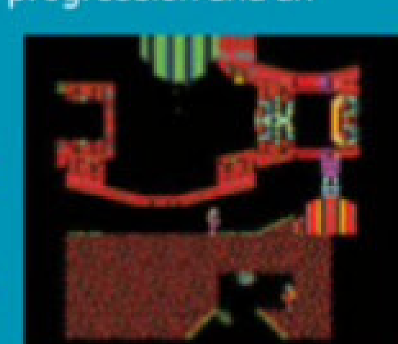
■ In 1986 Superior started to republish Acornsoft titles such as *Revs* and *Elite*, the seminal space game.



Rather than just repackage it, the firm issued an enhanced version that took advantage of BBC's hardware with increased colour and extra speed. In short, Superior published the definitive version of Braben's classic.

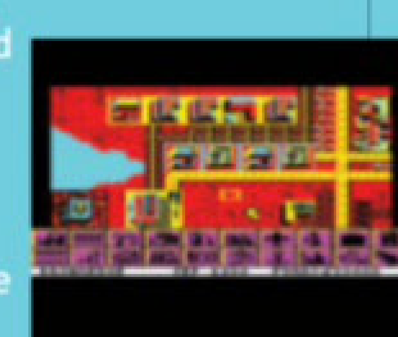
EXILE 1988

■ Despite being released fairly late in the BBC's life and requiring extra RAM to experience it as intended, *Exile* still managed to make a massive impact. Featuring a huge game map, non-linear progression and an amazing physics engine, *Exile* is the game that coaxed the aging hardware into producing something out of this world.



SIMCITY 1990

■ Superior continued to support the Acorn 8-bits into the Nineties and showed considerable ambition when it



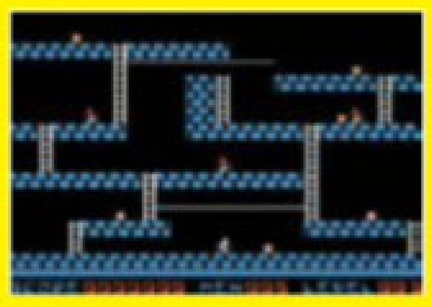
took on the hit 16-bit city builder. Programmer Peter Scott managed to squeeze the full game experience and all the graphics into just over 25K of memory. As unlikely coding feats go, this has to be up there with the best.

LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

More games with cool level editors similar to Repton 3

LODE RUNNER 1983

■ The classic platformer was one of the first to include a level editor, although it was easy to miss. On the Apple II version you had to press Ctrl+E in the demo mode to access it. Once in, you could build your own screens without too much difficulty.



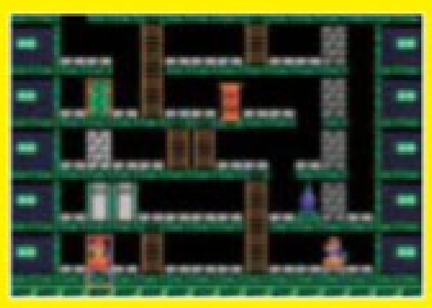
PENETRATOR 1983

■ This early release for the Spectrum and C64 was a pretty decent *Scramble* clone, but what set it apart from its shooter peers was the built-in 'landscape editor'. As the aforementioned title suggests, you could define the level's terrain as well as place missiles, radars and other ground items.



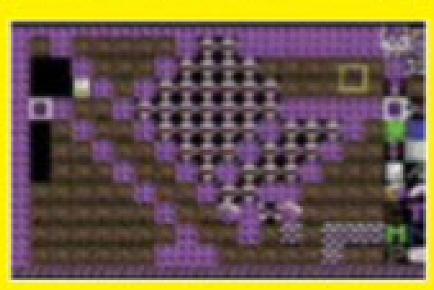
WRECKING CREW 1985

■ This often overlooked NES game saw Mario grab his *Donkey Kong* hammer and smash down walls, much to the annoyance of the construction site foreman. It was a simple platformer that didn't hold your interest for too long, although the inclusion of a level editor did increase the game's appeal.



BOULDER DASH CONSTRUCTION KIT 1986

■ Released around the same time as *Repton 3*, the fourth *Boulder Dash* game did include a side order of new levels but the main course was the construction kit. Unlike some editors it was really easy to use thanks to its icon-driven interface (no having to remember key commands).



CHAMPIONSHIP SPRINT 1988

■ The *Super Sprint* sequel merely introduced several new tracks, so selling it as a full-price title was always going to be tough. To improve the deal Activision added a simple track editor to its 8-bit home versions. Your designs were limited by the size of the screen, but it was perfect for every kid who scrawled race tracks on paper.





»[BBC Micro] The sequel introduced deadly spirits that you had to guide into special cages.

> "It was the best performing game I ever wrote during my stint at being self-employed"
>
> Repton 3 coder Matthew Atkinson

▶ addition, his royalty rate of 20 per cent meant that the *Repton* games had returned a very healthy profit, which was always the aim. "The possibility of commercial success was quite a significant attraction to me, as a penniless school kid," Tim muses. "I suppose there was also some desire to achieve fame and recognition, from peers and others, for my efforts. Writing computer games at the time was quite fun, so I might have done it without financial incentives, though the possibility of commercial success was the main driving factor."

With no desire to earn more money, Tim walked – a decision he now regrets to some degree. "One of my top pieces of advice to my younger self would have be to milk my franchise." That job now belonged to Superior, who pressed ahead with *Repton 3*.

Tim did stick around to design some of maps for the third game, but coding duties were handled by Matthew Atkinson, a programmer who was already on Superior's books. "I'd written *Tempest* for the BBC Micro for Atarisoft but midway through the project there was a change in management and it was published by Superior," says Matthew. "I submitted a few games to Superior after that without success and then I got a call out of the blue from Richard Hanson, asking if I would like to discuss a project they had in mind. I met up with Richard and Chris Payne and they outlined what they wanted for *Repton 3*."



»[BBC Micro] By collecting all 42 puzzle pieces you would spell out a secret message in the central hub.

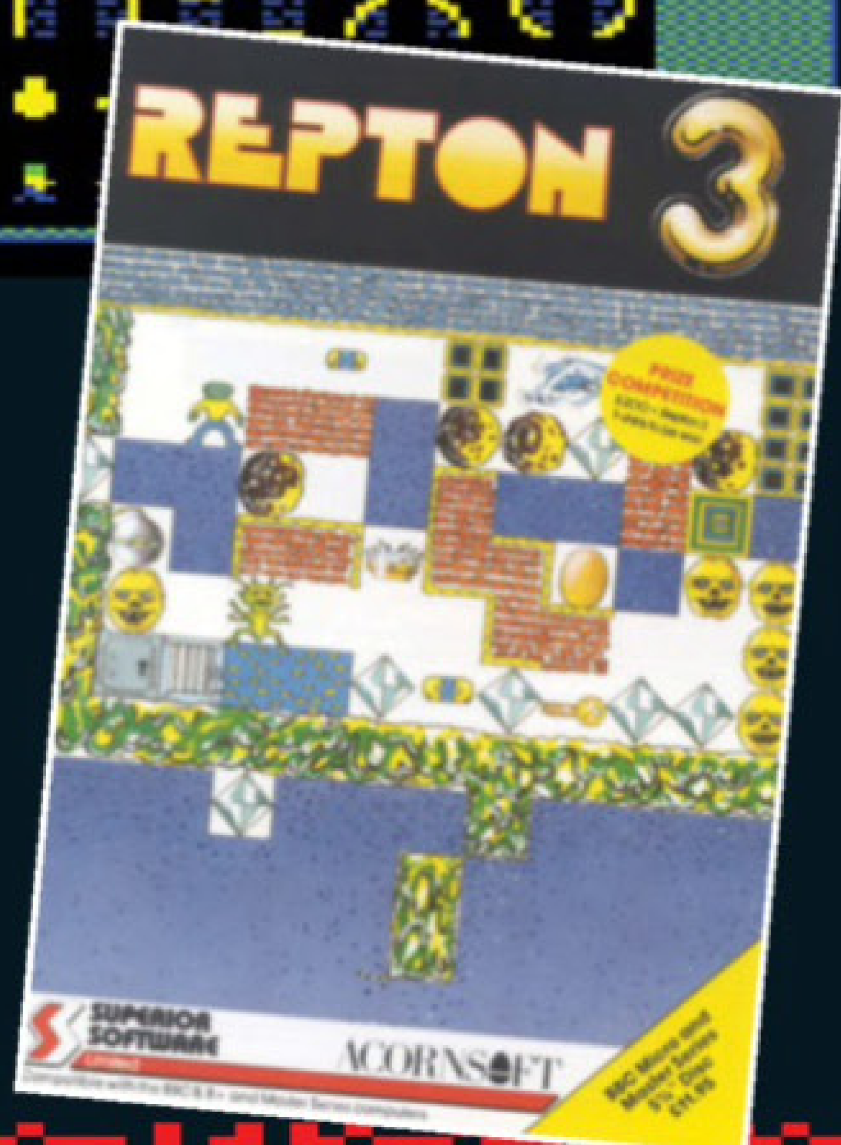
Whereas the first two games had all been Tim's work, the Superior guys provided the overall concept for *Repton 3*. The game returned to the level and password structure of the first game but did retain some gameplay elements from *Repton 2*. New additions included ticking bombs which you had to diffuse and deadly fungus that would expand and slowly consume the level, leading to some frantic challenges. The big addition though was an editor which enabled players to design their own caverns and characters.

"Superior came up with the idea of the editor and things like time bombs," says Matthew. "It was a broad design explained to me rather than written down. It was up to me to execute the ideas as well as I could, so I included things like options for an AMX mouse/trackball in the editor."

Repton 3 took around eight months to develop, largely due to the editor



»[BBC Micro] Besides building levels, the *Repton 3* editor let you design the graphics too.



but also because Matthew had to create the game from scratch. "All I got was a handwritten A4 sheet from Tim Tyler explaining some concepts about the game and how the maps had been compressed. I did have a stroke of luck, though, as I was playing *Repton 2* and pressed the Break key to exit, most of the game's graphics appeared on screen so I quickly saved them!"

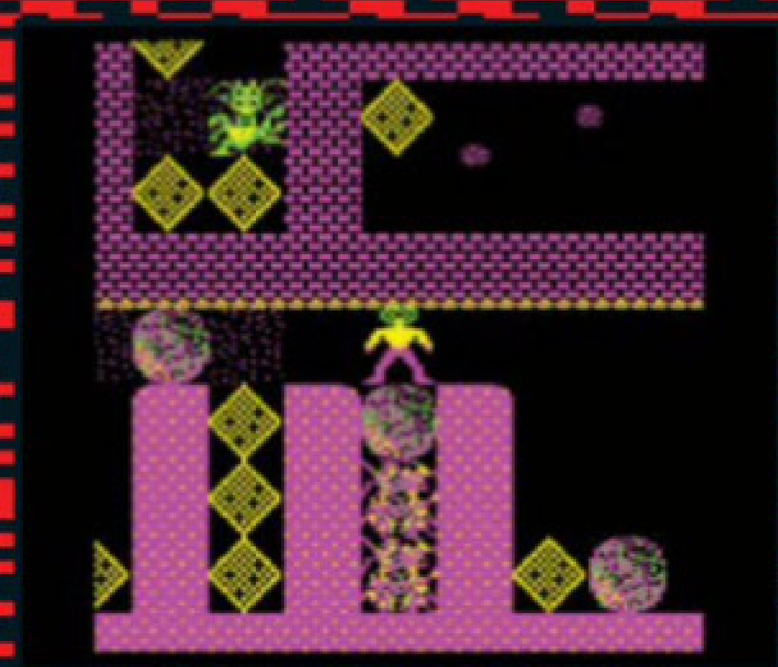
The slog was clearly worth it as *Repton 3* was a smash hit when it was released in November 1986 on the BBC and Electron, topping the charts for three straight months and outselling both of its predecessors. Richard Hanson was a fan of the game, and not just because of the numbers involved. "Some players prefer the linked levels style of *Repton 2*, whereas others prefer a series of individual levels, like *Repton* and *Repton 3*," he says. "While I enjoy both of those styles, *Repton 3* is my personal favourite." The editor clearly contributed to its success, but he wasn't unduly worried that its inclusion would harm sales of future *Repton* games. "High-quality levels can take a tremendous amount of time and dedication in terms of the design work, testing, adjusting, re-testing and so on. It often comes down to experienced teamwork."

Superior would go on to release three map packs – *Around The World In 40 Screens, Life Of Repton* and *Repton Thru Time* – each containing five scenarios of eight levels. The packs prolonged *Repton 3*'s life and the money rolled in for Matthew. "It was the best performing game I ever wrote during my stint at being self-employed," he says.

Looking to widen the appeal of the game, Superior decided to develop *Repton 3* for other machines, and versions for the C64, Amstrad CPC and Spectrum were greenlit. Ultimately it was only released for the C64 where it split opinion (*Your Commodore* loved it, *Zzap!64* very much didn't). Meanwhile, Acorn owners eagerly awaited *Repton 4* and, all told, three separate games would carry that title.

The first was *Repton 4: A New Beginning* and it arrived in 1988 on the BBC and Electron, although it wasn't a standalone release, rather it was one of four games included inside *Repton Infinity*, an ambitious package that was billed as the ultimate *Repton* program. It included a screen and character designer, just like *Repton 3*, but also a sophisticated editor so you could redesign all aspects of a *Repton* game and even create your own games.

Developed by David Lawrence and David Acton, *Repton Infinity*



»[BBC Micro] The expanding fungus in *Repton 3* was clearly inspired by the amoeba from *Boulder Dash*.



»[BBC Micro] Western Repton and Wee Little Repton were two of the scenarios explored in the expansions.

NOT A CLONE

Five Reasons why Repton isn't the clone of Boulder Dash

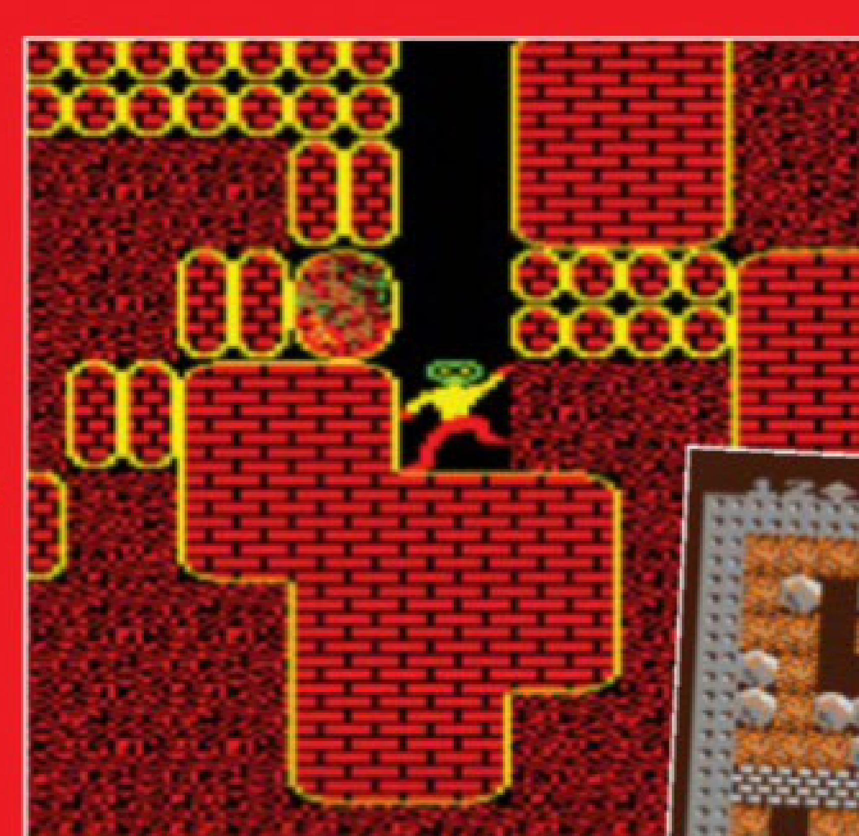
PUZZLE PLAY
- Every action must be carefully considered

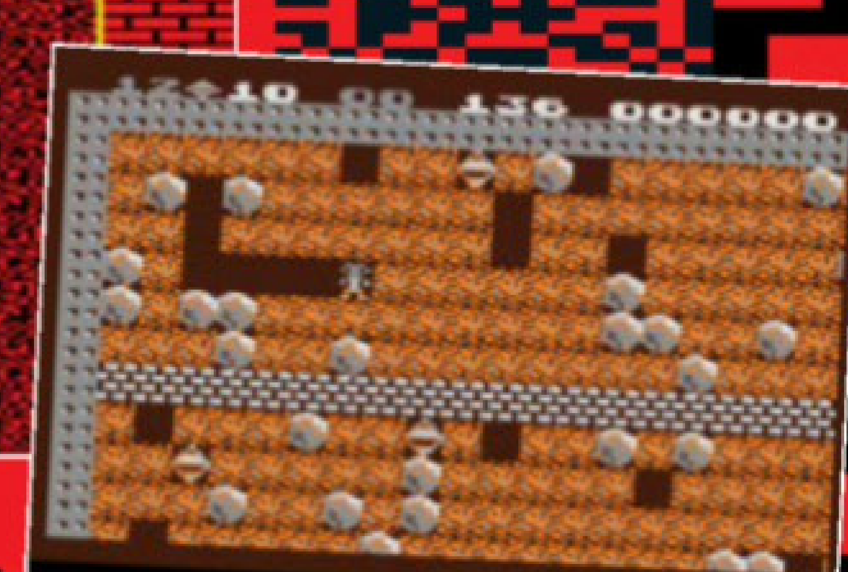
SUPER-SIZED SPRITES
- The graphics are larger and more detailed

LOCK AND KEY
- Safes provide an extra challenge in most levels

PRECISE CONTROL
- Repton is locked in position, centre of screen

MANIC MONSTERS
- Hatched aliens will actively hunt you down

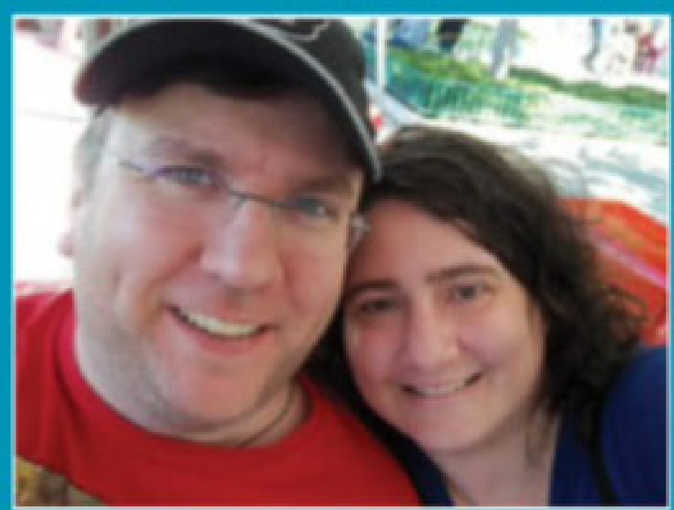




REPLICATING REPTON

Gil Jaysmith reveals how he converted Repton to the ZX Spectrum





How did you get the job of coding the *Repton* games for the Spectrum?
One of my friends got a copy of *Repton* for his BBC Micro. I was captivated by the game and I wanted to play it on my Spectrum. After a year I had coded a playable version. I sent it to Superior on a whim and I got a phone call back from Steve Botterill. Superior was launching a line of Spectrum games and it already had someone working on *Repton 3*, but I was offered the job of porting the first two.

Were you able to adapt the code and graphics from the originals?
Superior sent me an Acorn Electron and a copy of the games, which was sort of helpful in that it let me map *Repton 2*, but unhelpful in that the graphics were much smaller on that machine. I copied the maps from the screen to squared paper and then encoded them and typed them into my game. I copied the graphics from the BBC versions by a process of on-screen inspection. By far the biggest problem was the four-way scrolling. I spent ages working on the tech for this, but I got it to the point where the games ran at 17fps, with a 192x192 play area. When I cracked it you can bet I was feeling smug!





Why did Superior bundle the two games together as *Repton Mania*?
Superior sat on the games for well over a year. I think it had launched the boxing game *By Fair Means Or Foul* and it didn't do well, so it held back on things. Superior figured that *Repton* on its own wouldn't sell so it bundled them together. I was gutted because one magazine [*Sinclair User*] got it just before deadline and so for a month the only review was this negative 33%. The next month it got 75% and 88%, but I expect the first review sealed its fate.

Did you have anything to do with the unreleased spectrum version of *Repton 3*?
This was the work of a nice guy called Bill Percy. He didn't really get the logic of the rock fall and his version had a number of bugs. Superior asked me to consult with him and I helped him out. He didn't even use an assembler – he literally converted his paper assembly code into decimal and typed it in.

Do you have fond memories of working on *Repton*?
Although I wish they had released the game sooner, the guys at Superior were devoted to taking care of their freelancers. I spent hours on the phone to Richard Hanson just talking about any old stuff. It was a good time, looking back.

started life as a *Repton 3* editor before expanding into something much more elaborate. The four games included were designed to show off the capabilities of the editor. There was a recreated version of *Repton 3*, to show that the editor could handle that game, as well as the aforementioned *Repton 4* that introduced some new gameplay features. These included 'magiblocks' that could be freely pushed around and had to be combined to create diamonds, and photocopiers that were used to duplicate things. The two other games – *Robbo* and *Trakka* – showed off the different types of gameplay that could be created. Altogether it was an impressive program, but it suffered from one unfortunate flaw – the games ran slowly due to the new engine. The version of *Repton 3* couldn't keep pace with the speedy original.

While working on *Repton Infinity* Superior received an unsolicited BBC Micro sequel from a devoted fan of the series by the name of Paras Sidapara. This *Repton 4* featured balloons that rose in contrast the usual falling rocks and special capsules for passing through certain locked doors. As Superior was working on *Repton Infinity* the game was rejected, although that wouldn't be the last we'd hear about it.

In 1992 Superior released its first new *Repton* game for the Acorn Archimedes. *Ego: Repton 4* was a curious affair that hardly resembled the original 8-bit titles, which was unsurprising as it started out as different game entirely. Programmer Gary Partis picks up the story: "In 1990 Richard Hanson setup a new company named Utopia Software," he says. "The company's initial game, which Richard asked me to write, was *Personality Crisis* for the Amiga. In 1992 Superior thought it would be an idea to port the game to the Acorn Archimedes using *Repton* type graphics. I then literally transcribed the 68K source into ARM assembly,



»[C64] The Commodore version of *Repton 3* was faithful to the original and came with the integrated editor.

»[BBC Micro] *The Lost Realms* introduced deadly balloons, so you had to watch below as well as above.



added Archimedes-specific code, asked some friends to modify the graphics to look like *Repton*, and bingo, a new game."

The unreleased *Personality Crisis* featured an elephant that romped around mazes, collecting and assembling jigsaw pieces that formed pictures of famous people and places. The elephant was swapped out for Ego, 'the wisest of all the *Repton* family', and the game was released on the Archimedes. The jigsaw objective did hark back to *Repton 2*, but in truth this was *Repton* in name only. By this point the second and third games had been ported to the Archimedes so fans were better off revisiting those.

Over the years the *Repton* games have been updated and re-released on a number of platforms. Versions for RISC PC arrived in 1997, courtesy of ProAction Software, while Superior brought the games to Windows in the Noughties. The PC releases featured new graphics, new maps and tweaks designed to balance the difficulty across the games.

In 2010 the long-lost *Repton 4* game that Superior previously passed up on was released with the publisher's blessing. The game was retitled *Repton: The Lost Realms* and released for the BBC Micro and Electron by Retro Software. Programming was handled by Tom Walker, who admits that his involvement was greater than originally planned. "My original role was to create Electron and Archimedes ports of the game," he says. "I soon got roped into trying to fix some of the bugs in the 1988 BBC original. As the source for the original game was lost I decided it would be easier to rewrite the game, and then ended up doing exactly that!" The game featured 24 new maps, including some designed by Matthew Atkinson and Richard Hanson, and was aimed at seasoned Reptonians.

Repton hit handsets in 2002 with the release of *Mobile Repton*, and more recently the first and third games have been released for Apple devices. Richard believes there is a market for the series on modern devices and reveals that further releases are in the pipeline. "An Android version of the original *Repton* is scheduled. I'm pleased with the level of sales achieved by the iOS versions. There's potential on modern devices for the best of the retro updates, provided the gameplay is strong, and this is where the *Repton* games stand out."

There's the possibility of a new title. "Superior will probably publish a new *Repton* game in the future… it will be classic 2D," reveals Richard. "It's at the planning stage but anticlockwise spirits will be included, and the limits on the eggs, spirits and cages will be increased."

With sales for the BBC Micro versions topping 125,000 units, and that figure rising with all the re-releases, *Repton* has become the biggest-selling series in Superior's 33 year history. Tim Tyler may have left the series behind, but he's gratified to see his creation endure. "I'm happy to see that *Repton* survives," he says, "but I'm still waiting for the movie." Richard laughs when he hears Tim's comment. "A *Repton* movie is a great idea!" he eleates.

A movie seems unlikely, but then the appeal of *Repton* doesn't seem to diminish. Thirty years on and the little guy is still exploring tunnels that run deep in memory.

"Superior will probably publish a new Repton game in the future… it will be classic 2D"

Superior boss Richard Hanson





»[BBC Micro] Escaping Blinky and many chums in the *Repton 4* segment of *Repton Infinity*.



»[PC] The updated versions for modern machines feature updated graphics and new levels.

We would like to give a special thanks to Dave Moore for his help.



IN 'THE LORD OF T

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Powerplay: The Game Of The Gods

» RETROREVIVAL

SINCE WHEN DID HERCULES' TASKS INVOLVE TAKING PART IN QUIZZES?

» AMSTRAD CPC » ARCANA » 1986

I can still remember purchasing my copy of *Powerplay*. I'd just finished my paper round for the week and, as was customary with my weekly routine at that time, chose one of the budget games from the rack of 30 or so that were available. Typically I would pick up a Codemasters release (I *loved* Codemasters) but for some reason the art for Arcana's *Powerplay* caught my attention and I purchased that instead.

Upon getting home I selected a four-player game, only to realise that it was impossible to play against the actual computer. Luckily, I have three siblings, so I soon managed to coerce them into playing what turned out to be a surprisingly clever take on the general knowledge quiz.

Play *Powerplay* today and it still stands up thanks to its solid array of questions and lovable presentation. The game is set against a Greek backdrop and features Cyclopses, satyrs and even Hercules, who is the lowest form of the mythical beings found in the game. Answer questions correctly (the coloured tiles represent different categories) and you'll eventually mutate into higher forms, which will make you tougher to defeat.

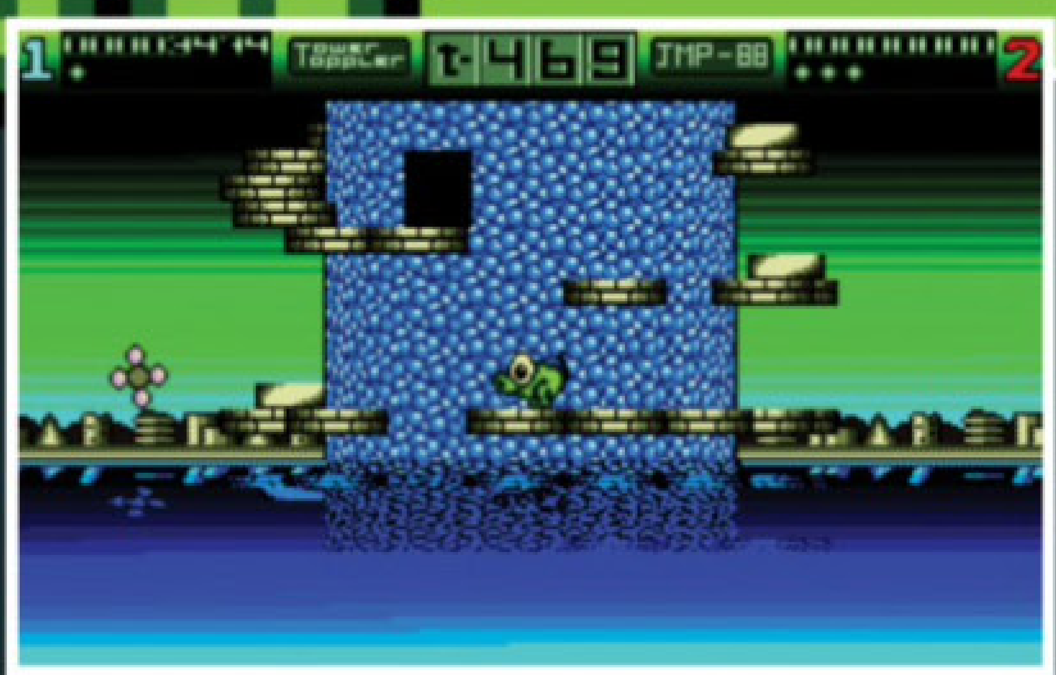
Challenge another player and win that challenge and you'll cause them to devolve down to a weaker form, eventually killing them. An entire team needs to be eliminated before you can win so you need to be hot on your general knowledge as you can't move until you've sucessfully answered a question.

Although *Powerplay* came out on numerous home systems, that earned Amstrad version will always have a special place in my heart thanks to its delightful colourful visuals. I even preferred it over the 16-bit offerings. I just wish my general knowledge was as good now as it was then. *



Top 25 Atari ST Games

Darran Jones and Kieren Hawken revisit your favourite games for Atari's 16-bit computer



Nebulus

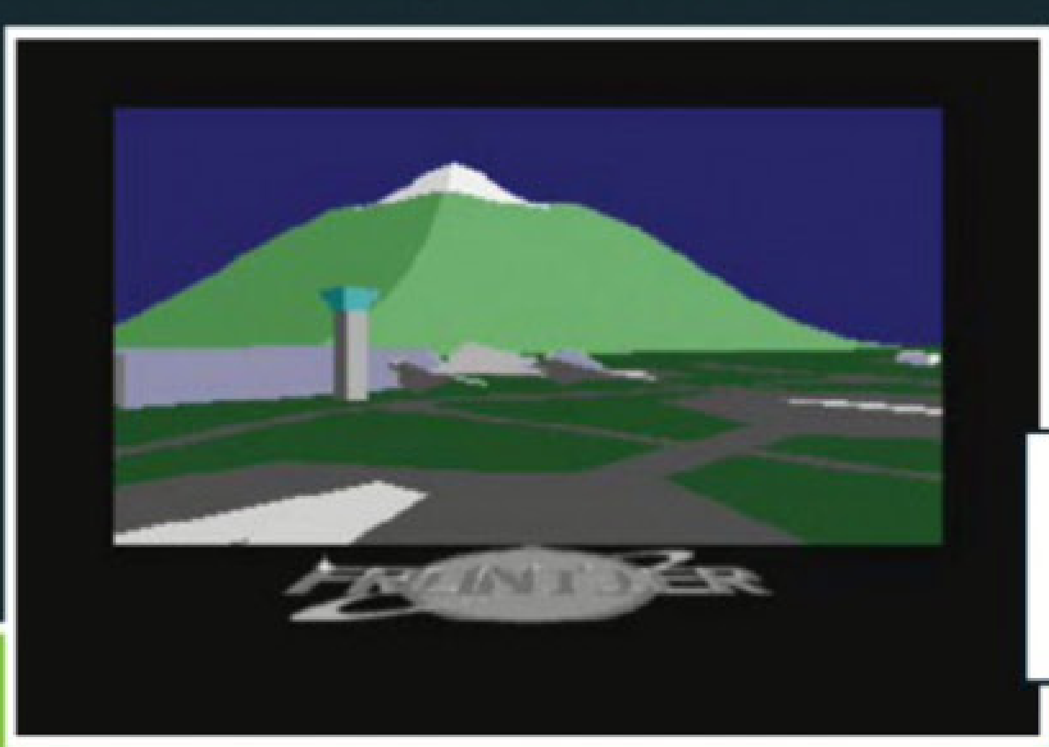
■ **DEVELOPER:** John M. Phillips
■ **YEAR:** 1988 ■ **GENRE:** Platformer

25 If you wanted to be cruel about *Nebulus* you could make the argument that it's nothing more than a fancy tech demo with a frustrating game attached to it. Readers clearly don't agree, however, as the tower toppler (an alternative name in some countries) has sneaked his way into your top 25. While the tower design is clearly frustrating (disappearing platforms are never fun) it's compelling enough to continually draw you back for one more go.

Frontier: Elite II

■ **DEVELOPER:** Frontier Developments
■ **YEAR:** 1993 ■ **GENRE:** Space trading and combat simulator

24 It may have been rough around the edges, but it also opened gamers' eyes to the possibilities that their computers could offer them. Some might not have liked its lack of handholding and the fact that it didn't have a definitive ending, but we'd argue that was one of *Frontier*'s strengths – it is a game that was essentially a huge sandbox to play in.





Gods

■ **DEVELOPER:** Bitmap Brothers
■ **YEAR:** 1991 ■ **GENRE:** Shoot-'em-up

23 *Gods* is a typical game from the Bitmap Brothers. It's polished to perfection, has distinctive, stylised aesthetics and proves to have plenty of depth beneath its surface. It's a little tough in places, but its super tight level design and challenging boss fights easily earn it a place on your list.

"Gods was an amazing game, and still is! Great sound, graphics and gameplay"
Paul Bennett



"Surely no ST list is complete without Jeff Minter? Eyes and ears were suitably melted"
Nathan Wind

Llamatron

■ **DEVELOPER:** Llamasoft ■ **YEAR:** 1991 ■ **GENRE:** Shoot-'em-up

22 Jeff Minter created a number of games for the Atari ST, and it's rather pleasing that our favourite is also yours. *Llamatron* was Jeff's answer to the lack of good *Robotron* ports that weren't appearing on many home computers. It's clearly a clone of Eugene Jarvis' hit arcade game, with its psychedelic visuals, raucous sound effects and fast-paced action, but it's also clearly a Jeff Minter game, with lots of odd additions and genuine gameplay enhancements that help turn it into one of the Atari ST's finest shooters.

As with *Robotron: 2084*, *Llamatron* requires you to shoot every on-screen enemy before you can move onto the next of 100 waves. Unlike *Robotron*, however, it features lots of surreal additions that range from a smart tomato that destroys everything on-screen, to Rizla cigarette papers and toilets. Your llama continually spits out bullets, enabling you to lock the direction of fire so that you can move and fire in different directions. It lacks the fluidity of *Robotron*'s system, but it's a good compromise considering the use of a single joystick.

Other Minter improvements to the core *Robotron* formula include a large number of power-ups that include 3-way shots, invincibility, faster bullets and shots that ricochet off walls. There's even a love heart that causes all enemies to gravitate towards you, which delivers its own risks and rewards. Fast-paced and endlessly satisfying to play, *Llamatron* is Atari ST blasting at its finest and proves that when it comes to creating white-knuckle, thrilling shoot-'em-ups, few are able to match the brilliance of Jeff Minter.

North & South

■ **DEVELOPER:** Infogrames
■ **YEAR:** 1989 ■ **GENRE:** Strategy/Action

21 *North & South* could have been a disaster for Infogrames. It was based on an obscure comic strip that few outside of Belgium and France had heard of at the time of the game's release, and it mixed seemingly incompatible genres together in the form of strategy and action.

While the source material was relatively unknown, Infogrames' game remains an impressive achievement that still plays exceptionally well today. The strategy is surprisingly deep, while the on-screen battles between the Northern and Southern armies are fast-paced, fun to play and easy to get hooked on. If we have one argument it's that the computer AI is a little weak, but this evaporates immediately when playing against human opponents. *North & South* is not only a superb use of a licence, but is a brilliant game in its own right.



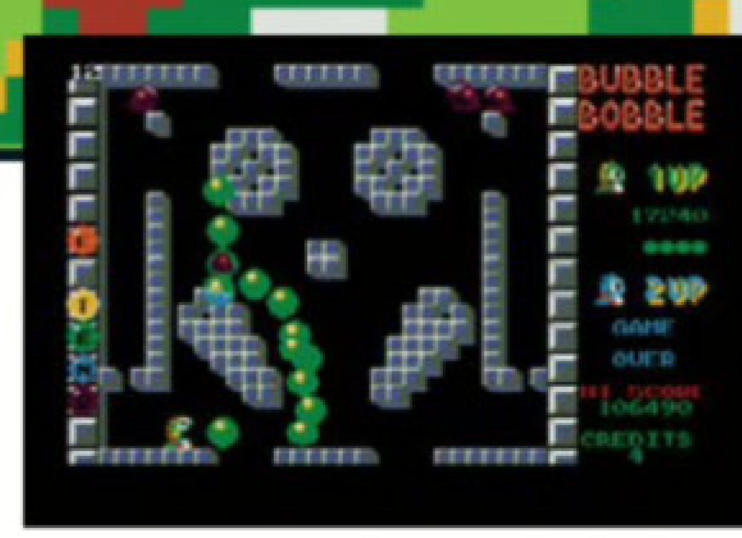
Carrier Command

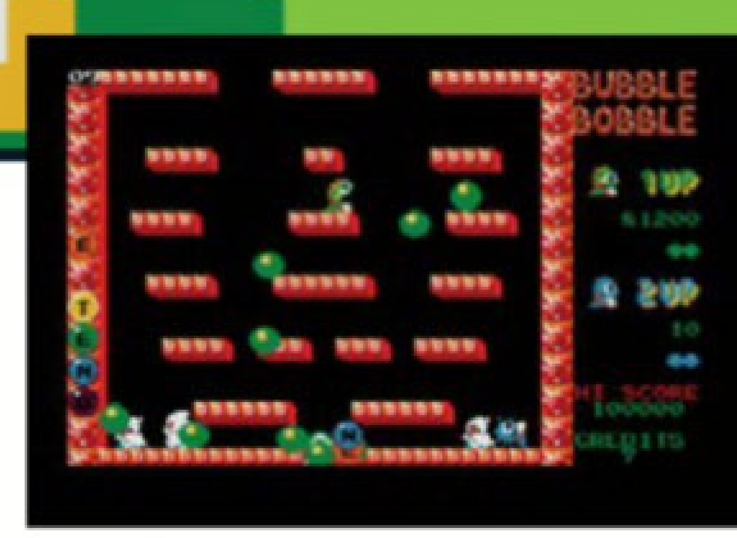
■ **DEVELOPER:** Realtime Games ■ **YEAR:** 1988 ■ **GENRE:** Simulation

20 Even today, the scope and sheer ambition of *Carrier Command* impresses. It's a wonderful catchall that encompasses blasting, exploration and strategy and it still feels special after all this time. There's no denying that the once state-of-the-art polygons now look a little tired, but there's also no ignoring the fact that once it gets its claws into you, it becomes very hard to tear yourself away from it. One of the genius aspects of *Carrier Command* is its icon-based menu system that enables you to do everything from launch ships to study new areas of the map. Then, of course, there's the fact that Realtime Games was able to cram an entire world onto a disk. This is a superb strategy title that absolutely shines on the Atari ST.

"The feeling of expansiveness and isolation in this was revolutionary"
gizmo1990







Bubble Bobble

■ **DEVELOPER:** Software Creations ■ **YEAR:** 1987 ■ **GENRE:** Platformer

19 Despite being host to plenty of authentic arcade conversions, only three feature on your final list. The first is Software Creations' marvellous adaptation of *Bubble Bobble* and it's a beauty. To be fair, all the ports of Taito's arcade game were highly memorable, but this stunning Atari ST port is, alongside the Amiga outing, arguably the best of the home computers. It's coded by David J. Broadhurst, and while it's not completely arcade perfect (it lacks the coin-op's secret levels), it remains a stunning port that improves immeasurably when played with a friend.

Time Bandit

■ **DEVELOPER:** MichTron
■ **YEAR:** 1986 ■ **GENRE:** Arcade/Adventure

18 Coded by Bill Dunlevy and Harry Lafnear, *Time Bandit* was one of first games on the ST to receive widespread acclaim and success. Although, interestingly, the game came from more humble origins, as it was originally released for the Dragon 32 and its American cousin, the TRS-80. *Time Bandit* at first seems to owe a lot to Atari's famous dungeon crawler, *Gauntlet*, with its top-down view and maze-like appearance. There are certainly a number of similarities between the games but *Time Bandit* has you completing specific quests as a single player, rather than the multiplayer chaos of Atari's coin-op. The player can chose how they want to complete the game by choosing which time gate to enter on each level but all of the levels must eventually be completed. One of the most iconic features of *Time Bandit* is the levels based on classic arcade games such as *Pac-Man* and *Centipede*.



"I put some serious time into Time Bandit on the Atari ST, great game" Cathryn Mataga



Xenon

■ **DEVELOPER:** Bitmap Brothers
■ **YEAR:** 1988 ■ **GENRE:** Shoot-'em-up

17 *Xenon* was the very first game by the now legendary Bitmap Brothers, and not only that, it was also released on the ST before any other platform. *Xenon* would really set the standard for all 16-bit games to come with its stunning metallic visuals (which would become the Bitmap Brothers trademark art style), pumping soundtrack by David Whittaker and original gameplay.

The game is very much an arcade-styled shooter, but it revolves around one very key gameplay aspect: the ability to switch between a slow, but heavily armoured, tank and a fast, but nimble, fighter. The tank is ground-based, while the fighter is air-based and the enemies follow suit – meaning you must switch between the two vehicles constantly. *Xenon* was an instant hit, setting up the Bitmap Brothers to rule the 16-bit roost for many years to come.



Rick Dangerous

■ **DEVELOPER:** Core Design ■ **YEAR:** 1989 ■ **GENRE:** Platformer

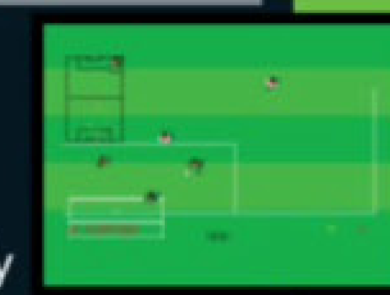
16 The brainchild of Simon Phipps, who also created *Switch Blade* and *Chuck Rock* among others, *Rick Dangerous* is a rock-solid platform game that is clearly inspired by the *Indiana Jones* films. The game was simultaneously developed for a number of different platforms but it's the 16-bit versions that are still best remembered and were the most successful for its publisher, Firebird. *Rick Dangerous* starts off in 1945 with Rick on a mission to retrieve the treasures of the lost Goolu tribe. But these guys are not to happy about that, and right from the start they are out to get you with a sequence clearly taken straight from *Indiana Jones And The Raiders Of The Lost Ark* where you must outmanoeuvre a giant boulder. Rick is armed with both a pistol and dynamite, which he must use carefully in order to escape with his life intact. Following levels will see Rick plunder the Pyramids of Egypt, a Nazi castle and then back to his home in London to stop a surprise German invasion that he learned about on the previous level. As great looking as it is difficult, *Rick Dangerous* is a game that rewards patient players.



Kick Off 2

■ **DEVELOPER:** Anco ■ **YEAR:** 1990
■ **GENRE:** Sport

15 With the release of *Kick Off 2,* Dino Dini cemented his place as the king of footy games, following on from the hugely successful *Player Manager* and original *Kick Off.* The sequel refined the gameplay adding several features to up the overall realism of the game.



Starglider

■ **DEVELOPER:** Argonaut
■ **YEAR:** 1986 ■ **GENRE:** 3D Shooter

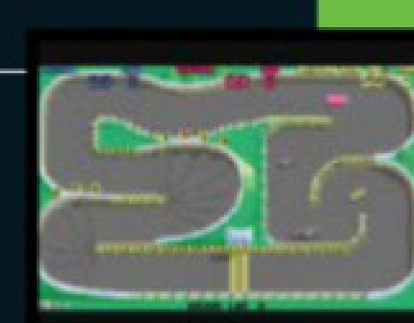
14 The game that put developer Jez San on the map, *Starglider* really proved the superiority of the Atari ST over its 8-bit rivals with its smooth wire frame 3D visuals, sampled sound and advanced gameplay. An equally impressive sequel would follow two years later.



Super Sprint

■ **DEVELOPER:** Electric Dreams ■ **YEAR:** 1986
■ **GENRE:** Top-down racer

13 A conversion of the popular Atari coin-op, *Super Sprint* remains a favourite of ST gamers due to the incredibly fun three-player gameplay. Racing against a couple of friends brings a whole new dimension to an already great game.



Sensible Soccer

■ **DEVELOPER:** Sensible Software ■ **YEAR:** 1992
■ **GENRE:** Sport

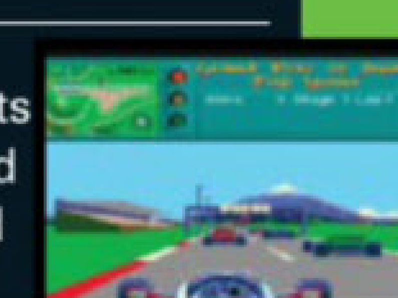
12 The ST fans have spoken and *Sensible Soccer* takes the crown of best football game on the 16-bit Atari. There is absolutely no doubting that the fun over realism approach of *Sensible Soccer* made it a huge hit, especially with the demographic of gamers who didn't even like football.

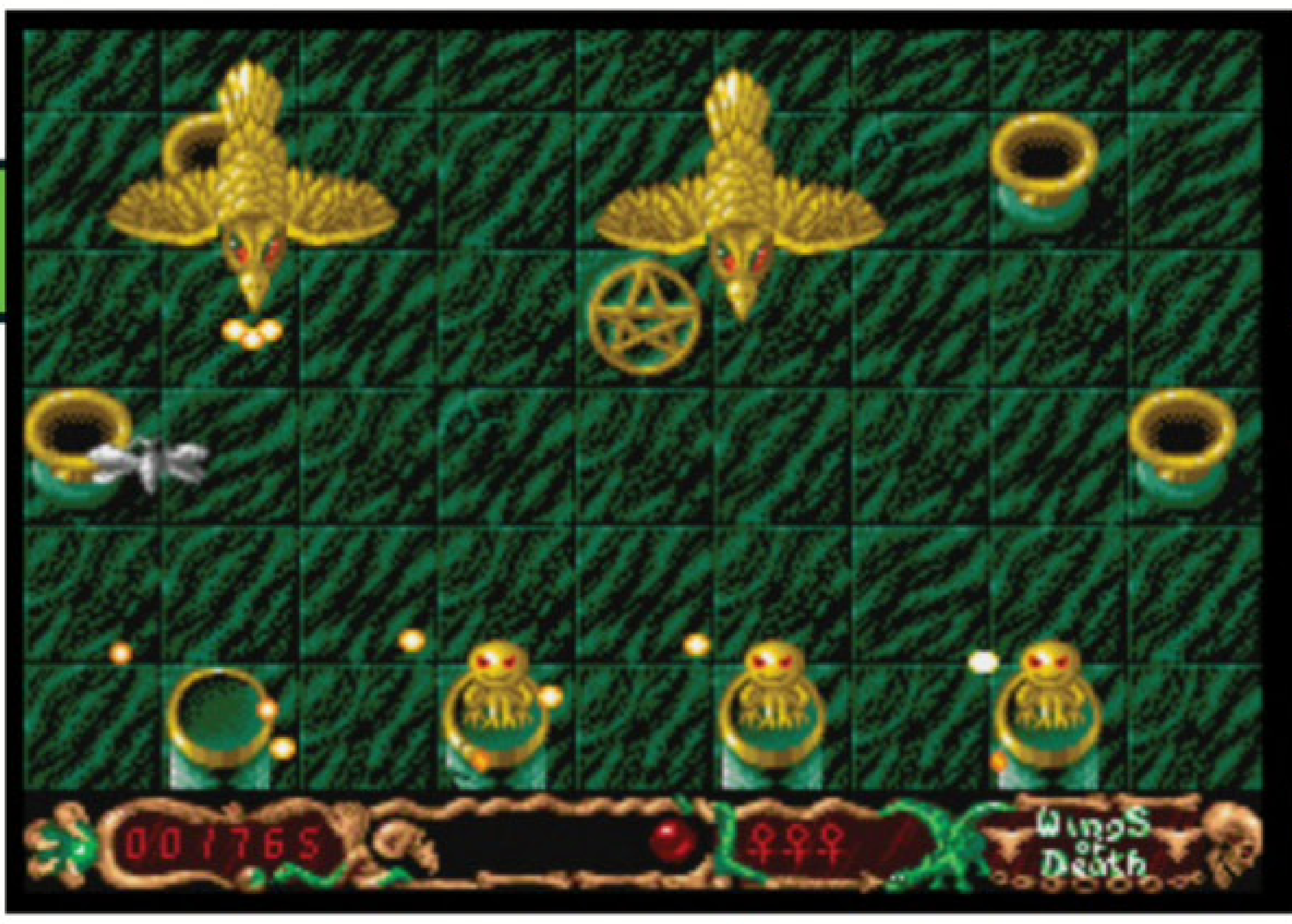


Vroom

■ **DEVELOPER:** Lankhor ■ **YEAR:** 1991
■ **GENRE:** Racing

11 *Vroom* blew away the public on release with its incredibly fast gameplay and impressive visuals that used a mix of both polygons and traditional 2D graphics. The game impressed so much that Domark signed up the developers to produce its own F1 title.





Wings Of Death

■ **DEVELOPER:** Thalion ■ **YEAR:** 1990 ■ **GENRE:** Shoot-'em-up

10 The only game from Thalion to make this list (although several others only just missed out), *Wings Of Death* is typical of the German developer's ability to push the Atari ST further than anyone thought possible. The game might not seem to be anything more than just another vertically scrolling shooter, but don't be fooled as *Wings Of Death* is one of the very best out there. Although particular praise is always given to the stunning visuals and sublime soundtrack by Jochen 'Mad Max' Hippel, you must also take notice of the wonderful game design with its well-crafted levels and almost perfect difficulty curve. *Wings Of Death* also takes full advantage of the upgraded STE machines too, improving the game in almost every area.

"Wings Of Death! Thalion's stuff really was above everything else on the ST"
Georges Kesseler

Oids

■ **DEVELOPER:** FTL ■ **YEAR:** 1987 ■ **GENRE:** Shoot-'em-up

9 For a while gravity-based shooters became all the rage after the release of Atari's *Gravitar* arcade game. Following hot on the heels of the popular *Thrust* was FTL's *Oids*, a game originally created for the Atari ST by Dan Hewitt. The big difference between this game and its contemporaries was the more arcade-oriented gameplay, making it far more accessible and less frustrating.

Oids combined elements of another popular game from the past, *Choplifter*, as you were tasked with zipping over a planet surface rescuing abused android slaves from their captors, the titular Oids. Another feature that set this game apart from the competition was the addition of a level editor that allowed to create your own unique stages. *Oids* received widespread acclaim from the gaming press and consumers alike and despite the later conversion to the Apple Mac, *Oids* will always be remembered as an Atari ST game.





Lemmings

■ **DEVELOPER:** DMA Design
■ **YEAR:** 1991 ■ **GENRE:** Puzzle

8 What is there left to be said about *Lemmings*? From the genius minds of DMA's Mike Dailly and David Jones, *Lemmings* would go on to be ported to just about every system under the sun. The ST version was one of the first and it benefited greatly from the use of mouse control, much like the other 16-bit iterations. Psygnosis followed the game up with an equally enjoyable expansion pack, *Oh No! More Lemmings!*, before creating a proper sequel with the less instantly-accessible *Lemmings 2*. ST owners with a penchant for strategy puzzle games can't go wrong with this game, but we are sure you knew that and probably own this wonderful little game already!

International Karate +

■ **DEVELOPER:** Archer MacLean ■ **YEAR:** 1988 ■ **GENRE:** Beat-'em-up

7 The only fighter to make this list, the release of *IK+* answered an age-old question – how do you make an already great game even better? By adding an extra player of, course! Now you had to compete against two equally adept foes in order to earn your belts and progress in the game. There were also innovative new bonus stages and a host of sometimes hilarious secrets that could be actioned with the press of a single key.

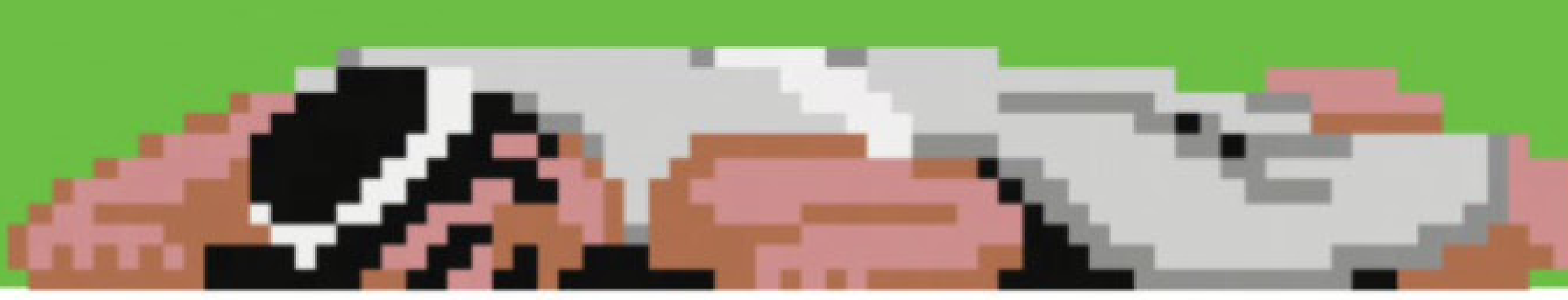


Populous

■ **DEVELOPER:** Bullfrog ■ **YEAR:** 1989 ■ **GENRE:** Strategy

6 From the often controversial Peter Molyneux came *Populous*, the game widely regarded as the very first 'God simulator'. The game didn't sound that fun in its basic concept, the key element being raising and lowering land, but in practise it became engrossing as you tried to increase your powers and punish heathens with earthquakes and lightning. The game was succeeded by an excellent sequel, too, that only just missed out on being included on your list.

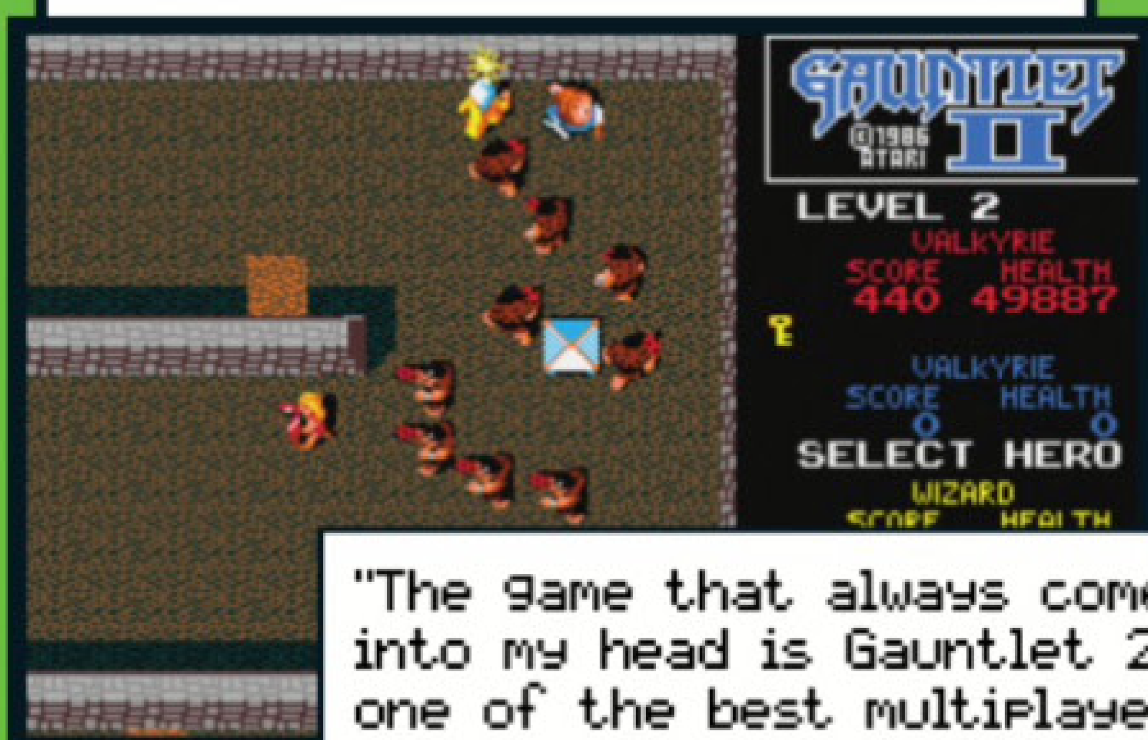




Gauntlet II

■ **DEVELOPER:** Atari Games
■ **YEAR:** 1989 ■ **GENRE:** Adventure

5 A conversion of the 1986 Atari Games coin-op, this superb sequel was a subscriber to the mantra of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'. With this game Atari just made subtle changes that made the game even more enjoyable, such as adding the ability for everyone to be the same character, a dragon boss, new special powers and the now famous 'it', which saw you playing a hilarious game of tag. The ST conversion was nigh-on arcade perfect with a special adapter allowing you to connect additional joysticks to replicate the four-player experience of the arcade original.



"The game that always comes into my head is Gauntlet 2, one of the best multiplayer experiences ever"
Duncan Hawken



"I found Stunt Car Racer to be faster and more playable than the Amiga version when I was playing it last weekend"
Resident Paul

Stunt Car Racer

■ **DEVELOPER:** Geoff Crammond ■ **YEAR:** 1989 ■ **GENRE:** Racing

4 When it comes to games that are just pure fun, you really can't look much further than *Stunt Car Racer*. Playing almost like a virtual roller coaster you simply race your dragster like car around a 3D polygon track trying not to crash or fall off. One very unique feature of the game for the time was the ability to hook your ST up to another ST, or indeed an Amiga, for some link-up multiplayer madness. There is no doubting that *Stunt Car Racer* deserves its place in the upper echelons of ST gaming.





Xenon 2 Megablast

■ **DEVELOPER:** Bitmap Brothers ■ **YEAR:** 1989 ■ **GENRE:** Shoot-'em-up

3 It is a testament to the brilliance of the Bitmap Brothers that both of its *Xenon* games appear in your top 25. This sequel was quite a departure from the first game, going for a very different look and abandoning the vehicle switching concept of the original for a much more traditional horizontally scrolling shooter. Although this game impresses in many areas, there is one category that is undoubtedly remembered better than any other – the music. Dance act Bomb The Bass provided the pumping soundtrack with its top ten hit, *Megablast*.



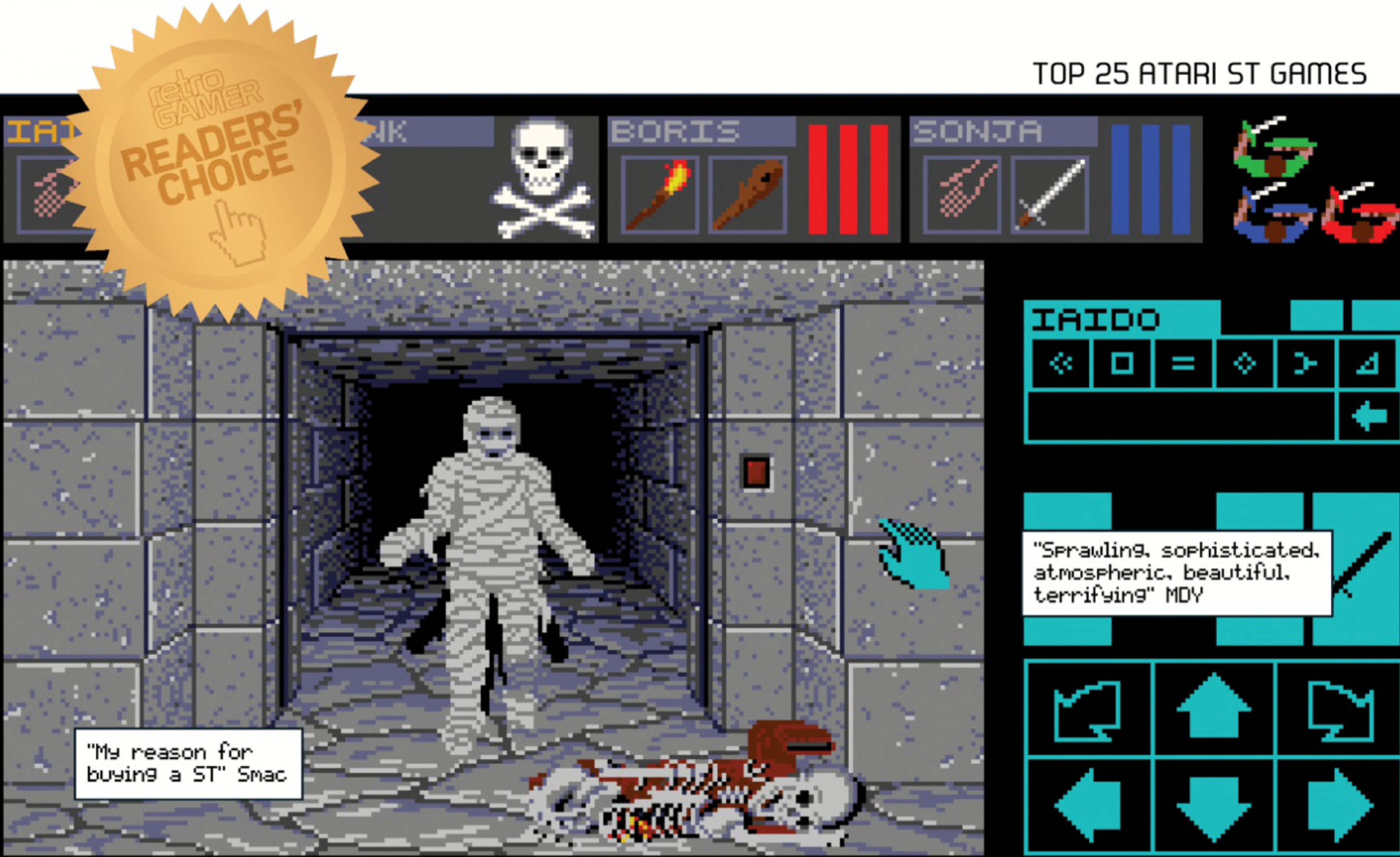


"The one game I really remember playing was Xenon 2, my friend had an ST and that was our go-to game when I went to his house"
Bryce Dumond

Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe

■ **DEVELOPER:** Bitmap Brothers
■ **YEAR:** 1990 ■ **GENRE:** Sports

2 It might be a surprise to some to see another sports game in the runner-up position on this list but once you have sampled the delights that *Speedball 2* has to offer, then there is no doubting it deserves to be here – after all, it did top your top 25 sports games list. Improving the original game in every way, you take control of a new team, Brutal Deluxe, competing in the now-underground Speedball league. You must try to make your way to the top and become the Speedball champions. Many improvements were made to the first game with teams of nine instead of five, score multipliers, injuries, new power-ups and several management options. As well as the stunning visuals, *Speedball 2* also features a superb music that won the 1991 Golden Joystick Award for Best Soundtrack.

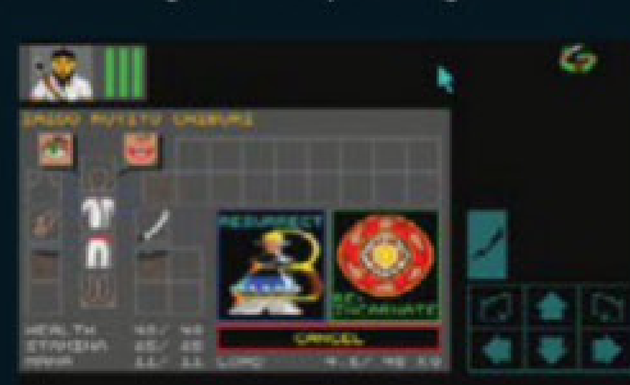


Dungeon Master

■ **DEVELOPR:** FTL ■ **YEAR:** 1987 ■ **GENRE:** RPG

1 *Dungeon Master* was the one game that really made people sit up and take notice of the Atari ST as a games machine. It reportedly sold over 40,000 copies in its year of release alone and still ranks as the best selling Atari ST game of all time. Since its release it has won no less than 25 major industry awards. Its impact on the industry cannot be ignored, it was not only responsible for selling thousands (potentially millions) of units of Atari's 16-bit home computer but it also set a benchmark for all dungeon-based RPGs to follow inspiring games such as *Eye Of The Beholder* and *Legend Of Grimrock*. Such was the games success on the ST that it was then converted to a further ten different machines over the next few years with several sequels and many more unofficial versions.

In the Eighties most computer RPGs were turn-based, slow affairs that only saw intermittent interaction. *Dungeon Master* changed all of that by creating a 3D environment in real time that the player could move through as they wished, making decisions along the way. *Dungeons & Dragons*-style experience points were thrown out the window in favour of skills that could be upgraded instantly by the way you interacted with the environment around you. The game also allowed you to directly manipulate the items found in the game with just a few clicks of the mouse. While *Dungeon Master* was not the first game to bring to life many of these features, it was the first one to make them popular and bring them altogether into one package. The way the gameplay made the game accessible to a much wider audience, introducing many new players to the genre who had previously been put off by the lack of action in other RPG releases. *Dungeon Master* managed to be a game that was instantly playable, but it required major investment to get the best out of it – an aspect very few games of the time could boast about.





As we already alluded to, *Dungeon Master* was also a huge departure from previous computer RPGs. Gone were the days of command-based text interfaces and simple ASCII graphics and in their place was a pseudo 3D engine and a simple point-and-click activated inventory system. From this game on, the RPG would never be the same and the features that *Dungeon Master* made popular would be replicated in other games for many years to come. The legacy of *Dungeon Master* can never be doubted and so it's only right that a game that debuted on the Atari ST retains its place as the system's all-time greatest game – as chosen by our readers, of course.

Five Reasons Why It's Great

1. Real-time interactive 3D environments
2. A simple point-and-click interface
3. Easy to play but difficult to master
4. It brought the RPG genre to the masses
5. It's the best selling ST game of all-time



There's something terrorising the streets of London after dark, and the Metropolitan Police are powerless against it. Nick Thorpe loads up his silver bullets and heads into the night…

MASTER of Darkness

During the late stages of Queen Victoria's reign, London was unrecognisable compared to the city it had been during her coronation. The Metropolitan Police had been formed to keep order, the Thames had been cleaned, and a massive population influx had transformed the city into the largest in the world. But all was not well, as the Whitechapel murders grabbed headlines and terrified the populace – and it's here where *Master Of Darkness* starts off, as the psychologist and paranormal investigator Dr Ferdinand Social has been doing his own investigations with the help of an ominous Ouija board. Jack The Ripper is just the tip of the evil iceberg as there are supernatural forces at work here, so with dagger in hand he sets out to solve the grotesque murders.

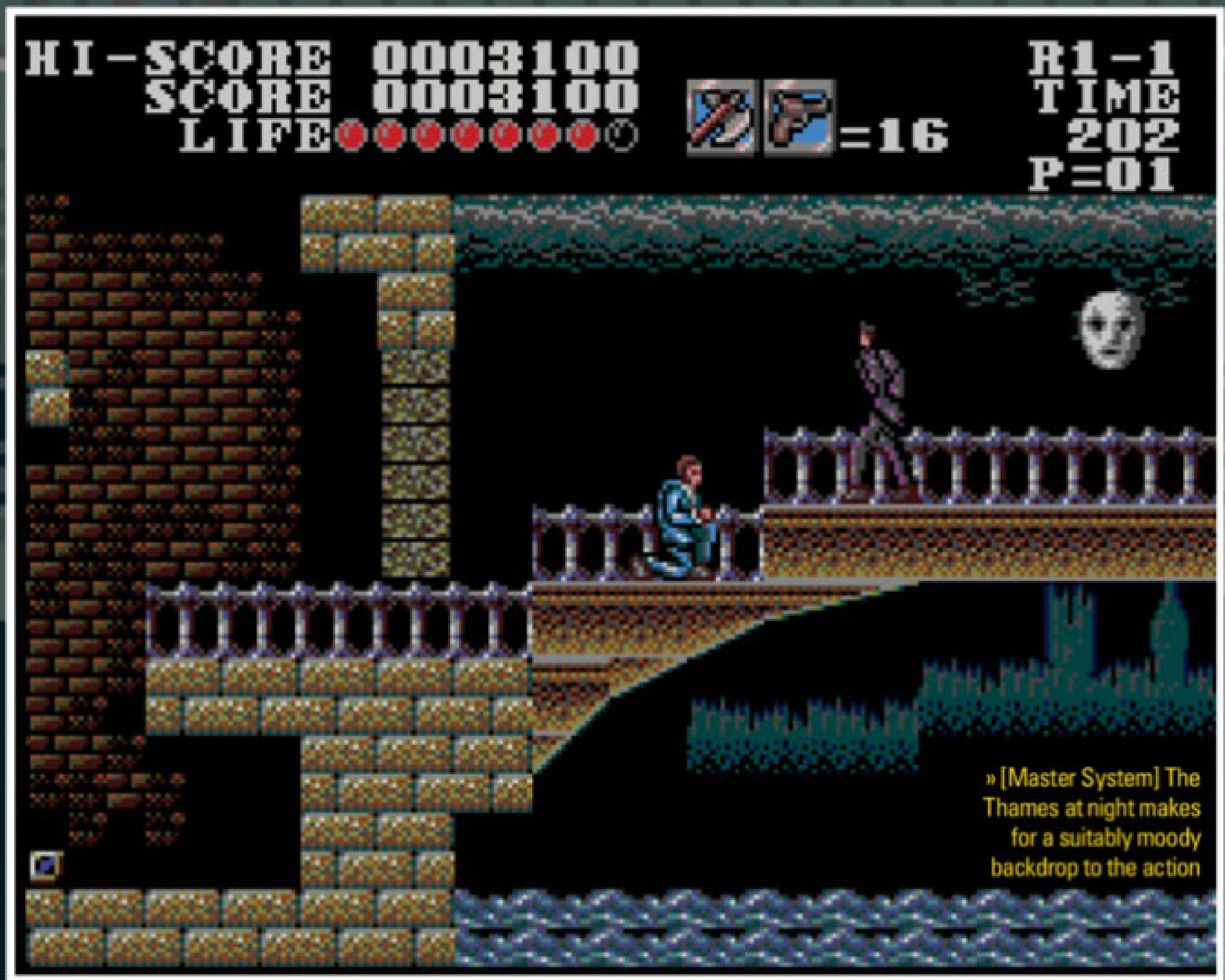
A quick look at *Master Of Darkness* reveals some striking similarities to *Castlevania*, and indeed the game does take more than a pinch of inspiration from Konami's hit horror-themed platform series. Like many desirable games of the era, *Castlevania* was bound to the NES by Nintendo's tight licensing agreements and Sega wished to provide an equivalent for its own Master System owners. The first attempt at doing so was *Kenseiden* in 1988, which distinguished itself from its inspiration by using creatures from Japanese mythology and providing a non-linear experience. By the time of the second attempt in 1992, Sega's internal development teams were busy providing Mega Drive software, so the work fell to SIMS, a development team set up jointly ▶

» [Master System] Getting hit will knock you backwards, except when you're on stairs – use that knowledge wisely.



Pixel Perfect





» [Master System] The Thames at night makes for a suitably moody backdrop to the action

> "Many of the names of the key developers of Master Of Darkness are unknown"

» [Master System] Walls hide secrets throughout the whole game, so always be sure to give them a stab.



» [Master System] Getting murdered by furniture is an embarrassing way to go, so don't get decked by chairs.



between Sega and Sanritsu. SIMS was a prolific developer on the Sega console scene, having produced a large number of games on behalf of its co-owner – *Master Of Darkness* was its sixth Master System game of 1992, following the likes of *Putt & Putter*, *Wimbledon* and most importantly, *Ninja Gaiden*. Unfortunately the developer often receives less credit than is deserved, thanks to the fact that the company was rarely credited for its work and most staff worked under pseudonyms.

As a result, many of the names of the key developers of *Master Of Darkness* are unknown, and it's not clear which other games they worked on. But what is clear is that SIMS' attempt at a *Castlevania*-style game was modelled much more closely on Konami's game, right down to the choice of Dracula as the lead antagonist (indeed, the prototype was simply called *Vampire*). The majority of design decisions are informed by those of *Castlevania* – while the game is set in Victorian England, your job is still to navigate a series of platform stages using a short-range weapon and a limited-use secondary ranged weapon. You'll strike floating masks instead of candles in order to obtain power-ups, and breakable walls conceal potions instead of meat. Even the staircases that connect platforms are drawn in the same familiar fashion.



So *Master Of Darkness* is all but a direct clone of *Castlevania* – but if you're going to clone a game, it's worth cloning a good one. SIMS had already proven its ability to create a very good new game from an existing template with its Master System version of *Ninja Gaiden*, and it did so once again with *Master Of Darkness*. Each of the game's 13 stages convey a very distinctive sense of place, and new gameplay elements are added throughout the game to keep things fresh. There are also some minor improvements on the classic *Castlevania* formula, such as Dr Social's ability to change directions mid-jump.

Much like SIMS' other Master System games of the time, *Master Of Darkness* is also highly polished. The game is visually excellent, featuring a variety of detailed backgrounds that make excellent use of colour and provide an unusual level of animation. Sewers spill out into the flowing river, posters flap in the breeze, the flames of torches flicker, and in one excellent section even the clouds start rolling on. Enemy sprites are also large and detailed, and provide enough variety that while most appear in more than one stage, all feel thematically appropriate. Even inter-stage presentation is top-notch, with text-based cutscenes

Boss Rush

How to survive the night by destroying Dracula's henchmen

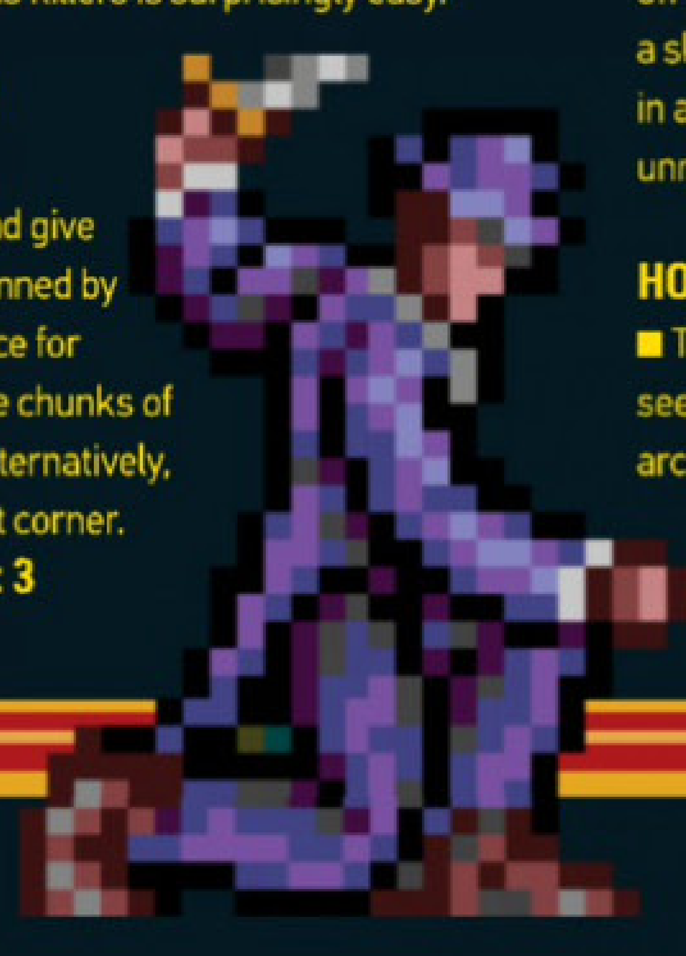
JACK THE RIPPER

■ The man behind the Whitechapel murders is on the loose and, for some reason, dressed in purple! He'll leap about the screen and swing a knife at you in a threatening manner, but given that Jack The Ripper is only the first boss, surviving an encounter with one of history's most notorious killers is surprisingly easy.

HOW TO BEAT HIM

■ Arm yourself with something powerful and give Jack a smack. He's stunned by hits and will stay in place for a while, so you can take chunks of his life away quickly. Alternatively, lob bombs from the left corner.

DIFFICULTY RATING: 3



POSSESSED PSYCHIC

■ This lady in pink isn't too much of a threat, and doesn't want to be one. Unfortunately, she's not in charge here. Team Dracula has hung an 'under new management' banner off her head, and has her conjuring a skull to bounce around the screen in an attempt to kill Dr Social. The unmitigated rudeness of it all!

HOW TO BEAT HER

■ The movement of the skull might seem erratic, but it follows a path – it'll arc until it hits a wall, and rebound off on the same path. Equip yourself with a power weapon and attack away.

DIFFICULTY RATING: 5



COUNT MASSEN – FIRST ENCOUNTER

■ This reclusive aristocrat has been meddling with the dark arts, and is now keen to put a stop to Dr Social's interference! The toughest boss fight yet takes place on the hands of a giant clock, with Massen flying a circular path around the circumference of the clock face at a frightening speed whilst lobbing fireballs at you.

HOW TO BEAT HIM

■ Massen's fireballs arrive in threes and spread out quickly. Take advantage of this by using a stake or sabre to get some extra range, allowing them to spread out further and reduce your chances of taking a hit.

DIFFICULTY RATING: 6



Vampire Slayer Toolkit

DAGGER
■ Basic weapon, it is weak and has a short range.

SABRE
■ Longest reaching weapon in the game.

STAKE
■ A little shorter than the sabre, but more powerful.

AXE
■ The game's strongest weapon but has a limited range.

PISTOL
■ Fires silver bullets straight ahead of you.

BOMB
■ The arced throw allows you to take out enemies from below.

BOOMERANG
■ You can't catch it, but it will come back on itself.

PROJECTILE
■ Looks like a silver stake and is just as effective.

HEALTH POTION
■ Restores 50% of your health.

EMERALD
■ Destroys all of the enemies on the screen.

POINTS GLOBE
■ Awards bonus points depending on colour.

DR SOCIAL DOLL
■ Awards a helpful extra life.

accompanied by stills that highlight key story developments.

While sound effects are used sparingly, *Master Of Darkness*' audio is rather excellent and pushes the Master System's sound hardware to rarely-achieved heights. This is one of the few aspects of *Master Of Darkness* that can be definitely attributed to specific people – in this case, Takashi Horiguchi and Yoko Wada. The game's tunes resemble Horiguchi's work on the Master System *Ninja Gaiden* soundtrack, with a similar driving feel and instrumentation. You can also discern some of Wada's influence – her prior work was on *Air Rescue*, another game with heroic themes. The personal style of the two composers ensure that sound is one area in which *Master Of Darkness* can be clearly distinguished from *Castlevania*, as Horiguchi and Wada settled on a series of sombre tunes that nonetheless drive players forward.

Master Of Darkness was critically successful, with a round of positive reviews headed up by a superb 92% from *Mean Machines Sega*. *Radion Automatic* called it "easily one of the best Master System games released in a long time," while Paul Davies declared that it "drives a stake through the hearts of all the parasitical platform games on the Master System that offer nothing new to explore and become boring very quickly."



» [Master System] Each stage is visually varied, taking in a variety of backdrops to illustrate Dr Social's journey.

The game was a hit at retail, too. Debuting as the number two game in the UK Master System charts, it supplanted *Lemmings* as the next in line to *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*'s throne, and later earned itself a budget re-release in Sega's Classics line. International audiences received a Game Gear version, titled *Vampire: Master Of Darkness* in North America and *In The Wake Of Vampire* in Japan, which was very faithful to the Master System game. It's a fairly good version which makes some slight design changes to accommodate for the smaller screen resolution, but the additional viewing area works in favour of the Master System version.



» [Master System] There's more than a slight hint of *Castlevania III* about this cathedral scene…

In spite of its contemporary popularity, *Master Of Darkness* never became one of Sega's favoured properties. Konami signed up as a Sega developer while SIMS was working on the game, and within a year and a half had released an official *Castlevania* game on the Mega Drive, putting an end to the need for an imitator. Despite Sega's prolific use of its back catalogue in compilations and licensed retro devices, *Master Of Darkness* has been almost entirely neglected since then – the sole re-release has been a digital download of the Game Gear version on Nintendo's 3DS Virtual Console service. If you don't have a 3DS, you'll need to track down a Master System or Game Gear copy of the game to play it today.



COUNT MASSEN – ROUND TWO

■ Arriving at the basement laboratory, Dr Social discovers that the crazy count is back and he's learned some new tricks. This time Massen's attack involves dematerialising into a quartet of bouncing fireballs, before reforming in a new location. He can't be harmed until he's back in his human form, so you'll have to alternate between aggression and evasion.

HOW TO BEAT HIM

■ Massen will always reform in one of five places. If you keep finding yourself on the wrong side of the room, the pistol and a projectile will help you out most here.

DIFFICULTY RATING: 7

COUNT MASSEN – FINAL SHOWDOWN

■ Dracula's castle in Transylvania is the setting for Massen's last stand, and he's really raised the stakes – quite literally, as he floats just above a set of retractable wooden stakes, while letting a lazily bouncing fireball assist them. Since Dr Social can't fly, your only chance to hit the madman is to ascend constantly-descending platforms. Good luck!



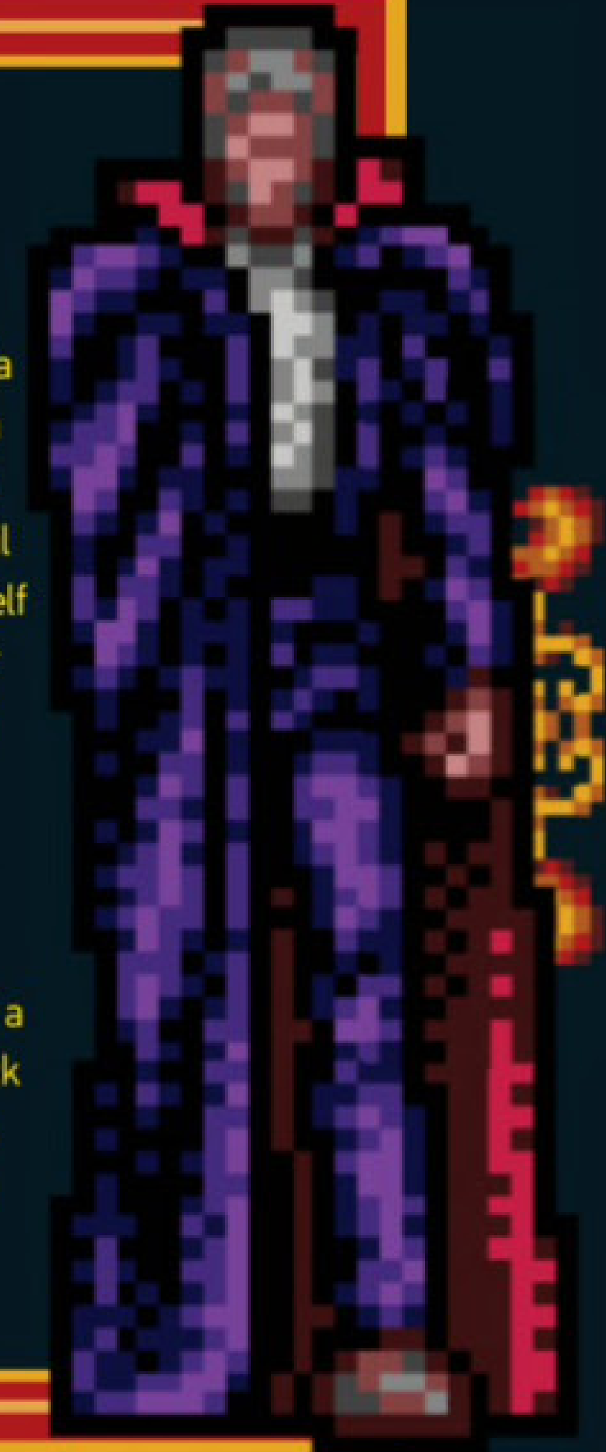
HOW TO BEAT HIM

■ Proper strategy is crucial to victory here, as the final stage can leave you low on health, ammunition and time coming into the fight. Come in prepared with a liberal amount of projectiles, or prepare for a drawn-out fight.

DIFFICULTY RATING: 8

DRACULA

■ With his right-hand man defeated, Dracula himself enters the fray. He starts off with an illusory attack involving three fake versions of himself, before progressing flinging to evil purple flames and finally surrounding himself with a shield of bats. It's now or never for Dr Social – if he wins, he can return to English soil as a hero. The alternative? Well, that doesn't bear thinking about…



HOW TO BEAT HIM

■ So long as you have projectiles, this one's a doddle. The clone phase is harmless, so stick to the left and throw projectiles to the right. You'll always hit Dracula and should defeat him before he varies his attack pattern.

DIFFICULTY RATING: 4



» [Master System] Later stages are filled with enemies, so you'll need a strong weapon on hand.



» [Master System] Bosses all have their own dialogue, which is predictably over-the-top.

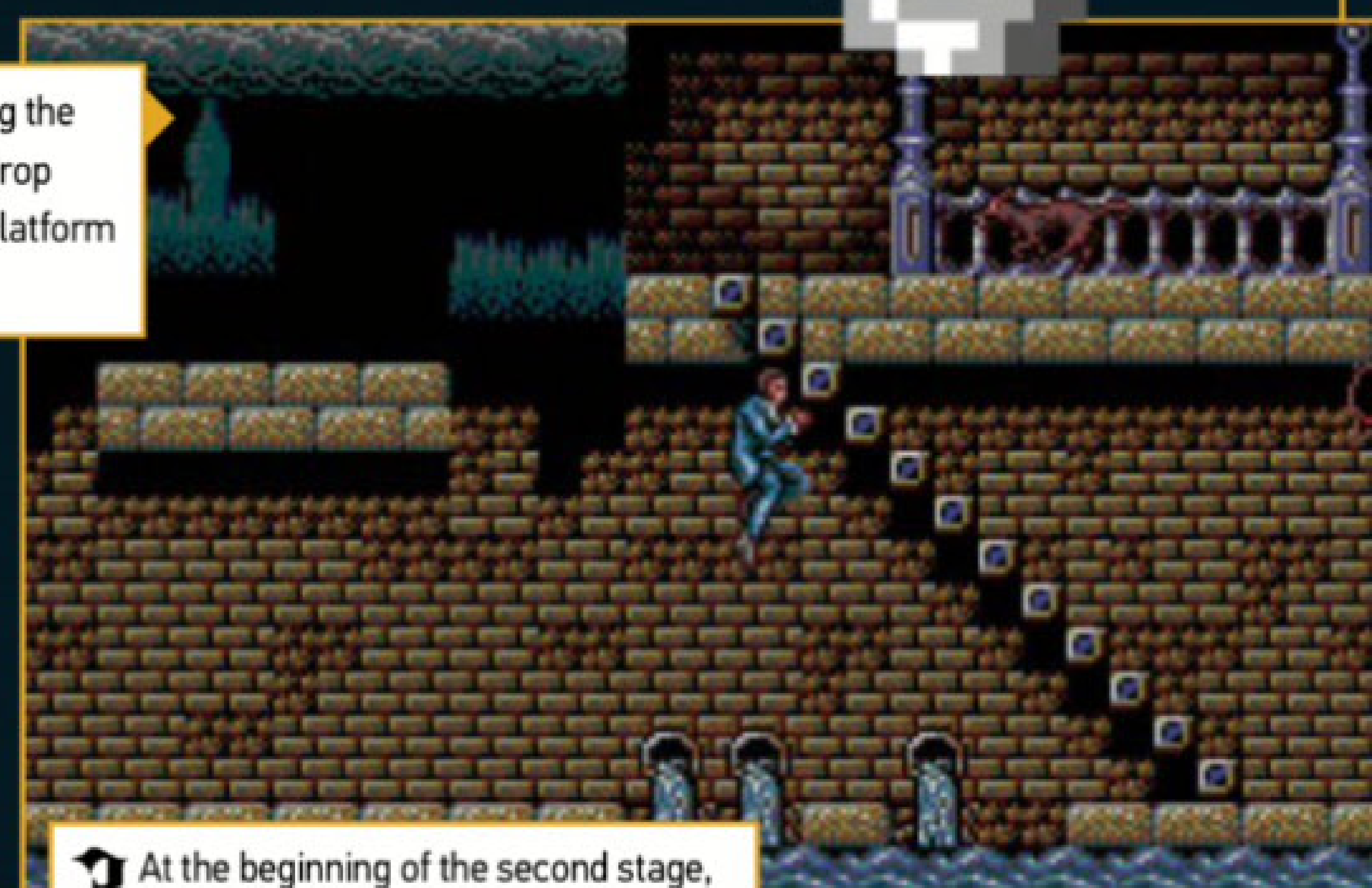
> "In spite of its popularity, Master Of Darkness never became one of Sega's favoured properties"

Even though *Master Of Darkness* has largely been forgotten by Sega, the game is well worth tracking down for all kinds of players. *Castlevania* fans who may be tempted to dismiss the game due to the fact that it's an obvious clone should actually give it a look – as a game that could pass for an extra instalment of your favourite series, *Master Of Darkness* is a great example of how the Master System can complement a NES collection. Similarly, if you're a fan of platform games in general, this is well worth your time. Once you do try it, you will come to discover something that Master System fanatics have known for a very long time: *Master Of Darkness* is a spooky spectacular.

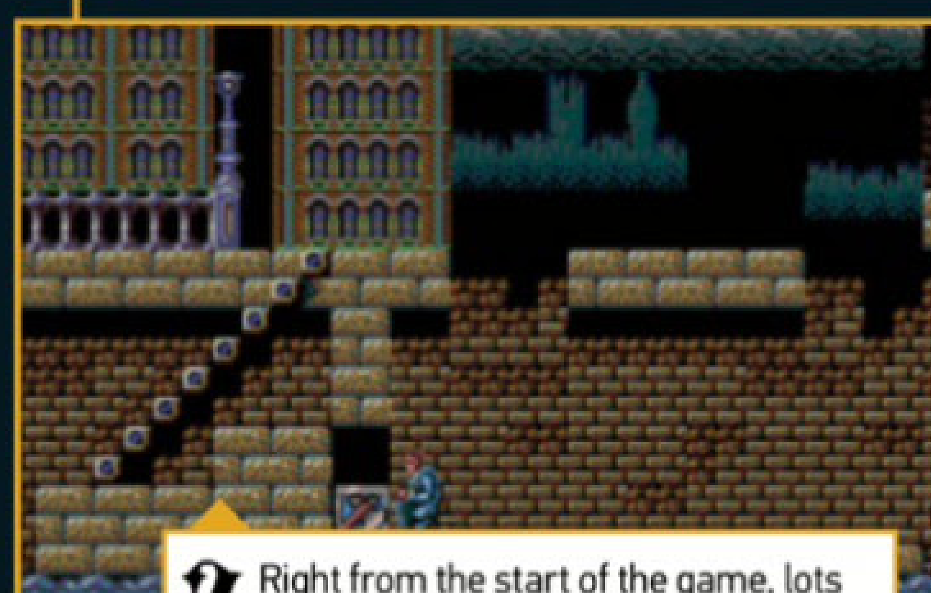
Lighting the way

We allow you to see a path through Master Of Darkness

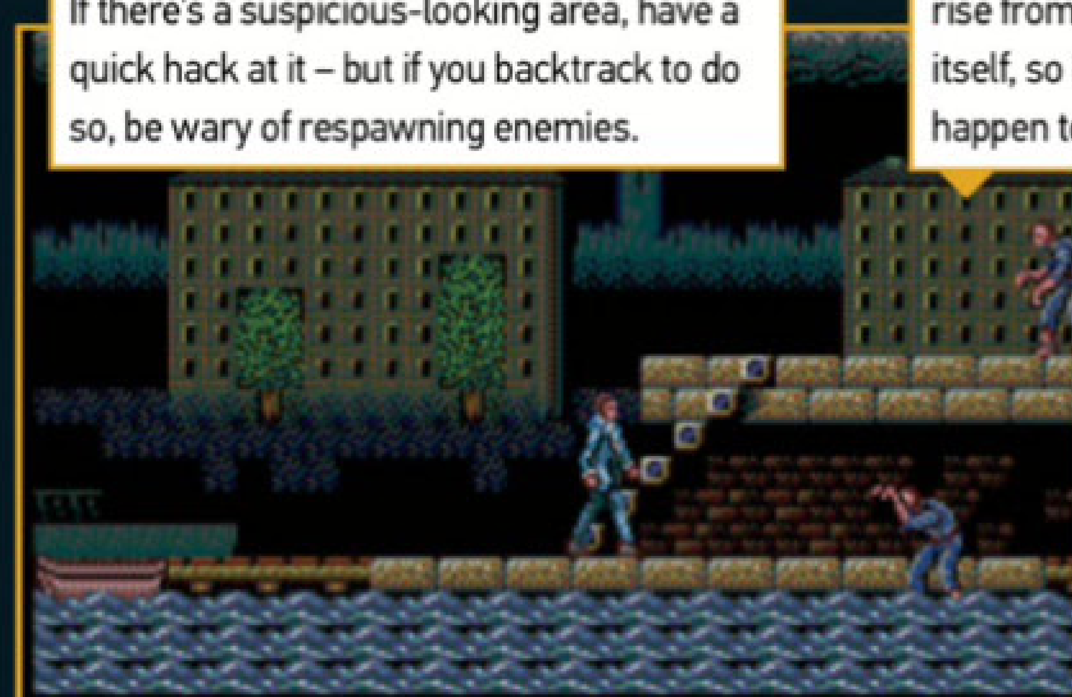
Act 1: Thames River



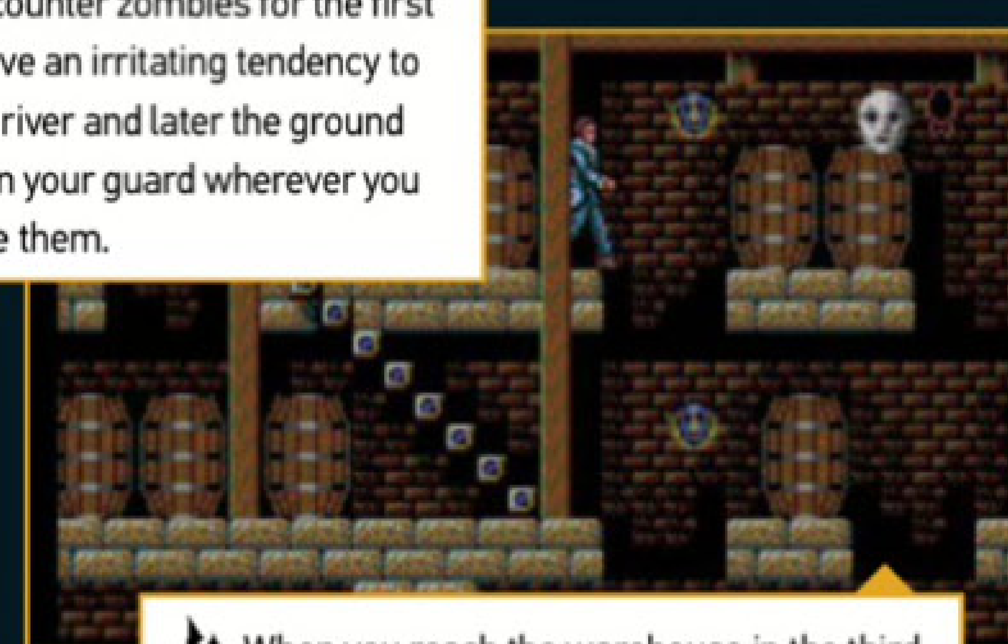
1 Dr Social starts out his investigations by checking the Thames, the site of the recent murder cases. A drop into the river is fatal, so make sure to stay clear of platform edges – especially when bats are around.



2 Right from the start of the game, lots of walls can be destroyed for bonuses. If there's a suspicious-looking area, have a quick hack at it – but if you backtrack to do so, be wary of respawning enemies.



3 At the beginning of the second stage, you'll encounter zombies for the first time. They have an irritating tendency to rise from the river and later the ground itself, so be on your guard wherever you happen to see them.



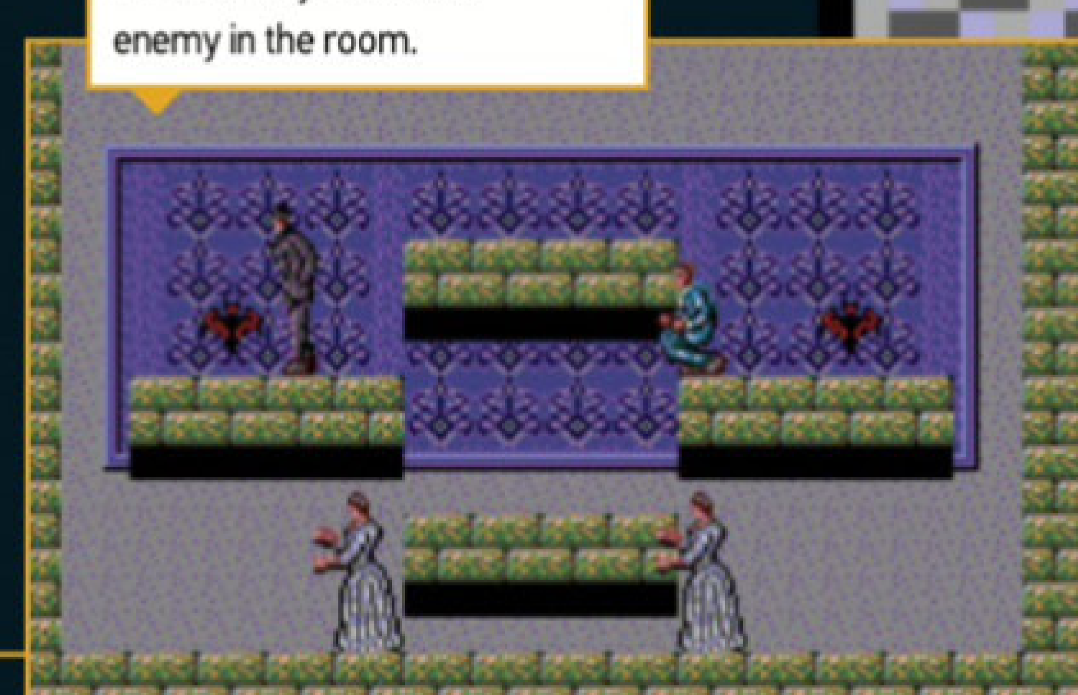
4 When you reach the warehouse in the third stage, be warned – a single fall will be fatal. The area also happens to be loaded with bats and apparitions, so it might be wise to pack a pistol to take them out early.

Act 2: The House Of Wax Dolls



1 The initial cave of waxworks looks very dangerous, but it's actually pretty simple to figure out. The ladies in the white dresses will animate once you walk past them – all the others are just background props that stay put.

2 Once you're in the house itself, you'll have your first encounter with ambush rooms. These sealed rooms spawn a group of enemies and will only open up again once you have destroyed the last enemy in the room.



Act 3: Epitaph



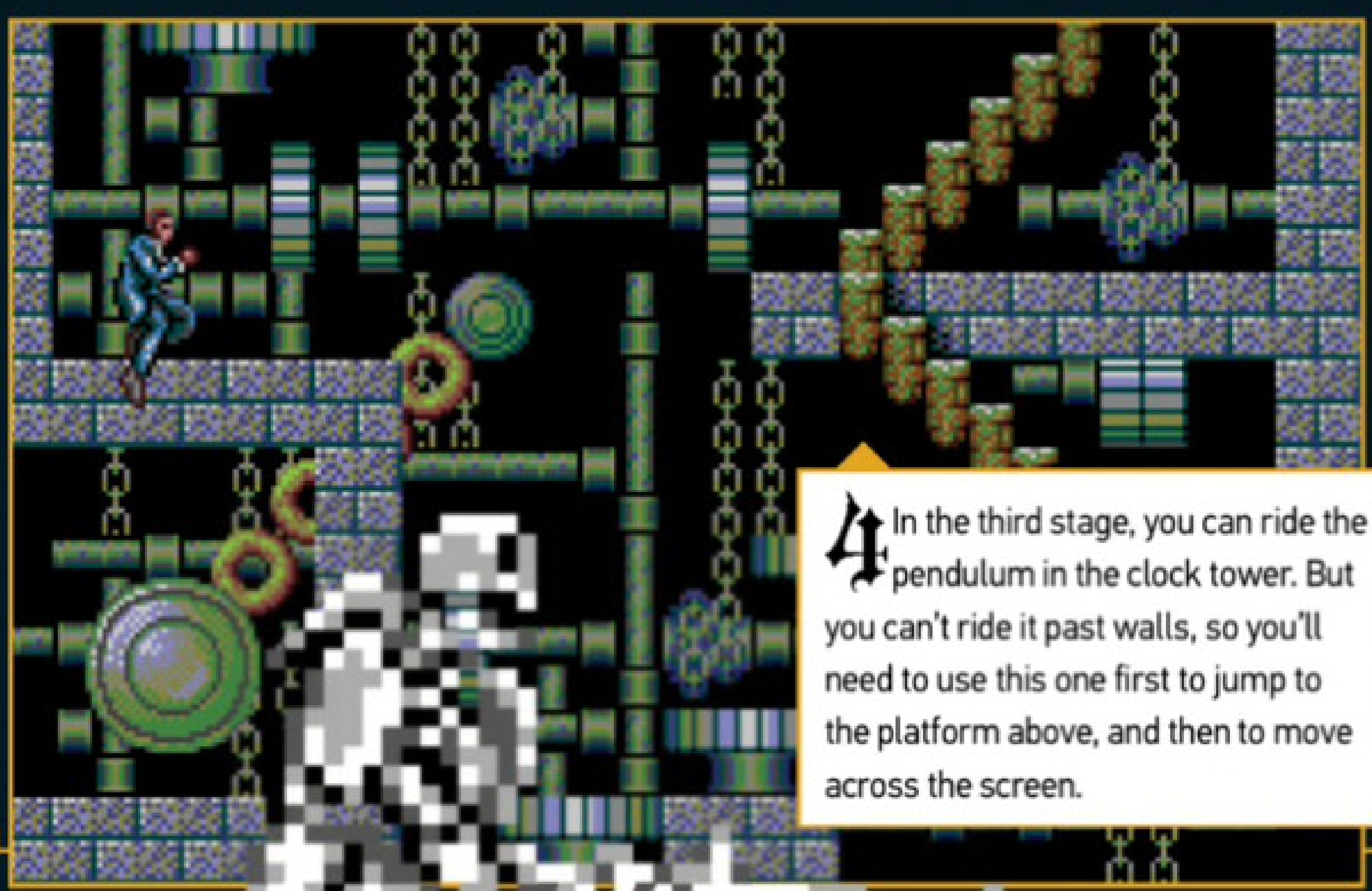
1 When you reach the top of the bell tower in stage 1, watch out for the central block beneath the bell – it'll fall and you'll miss an excellent route down the right-hand stairwell that features a variety of pick-ups.



2 The second stage features some very dangerous enemies. Skeleton soldiers have enormous reach when they swing their swords, so watch out for them. Warlocks also show up here, and they can fire projectiles.

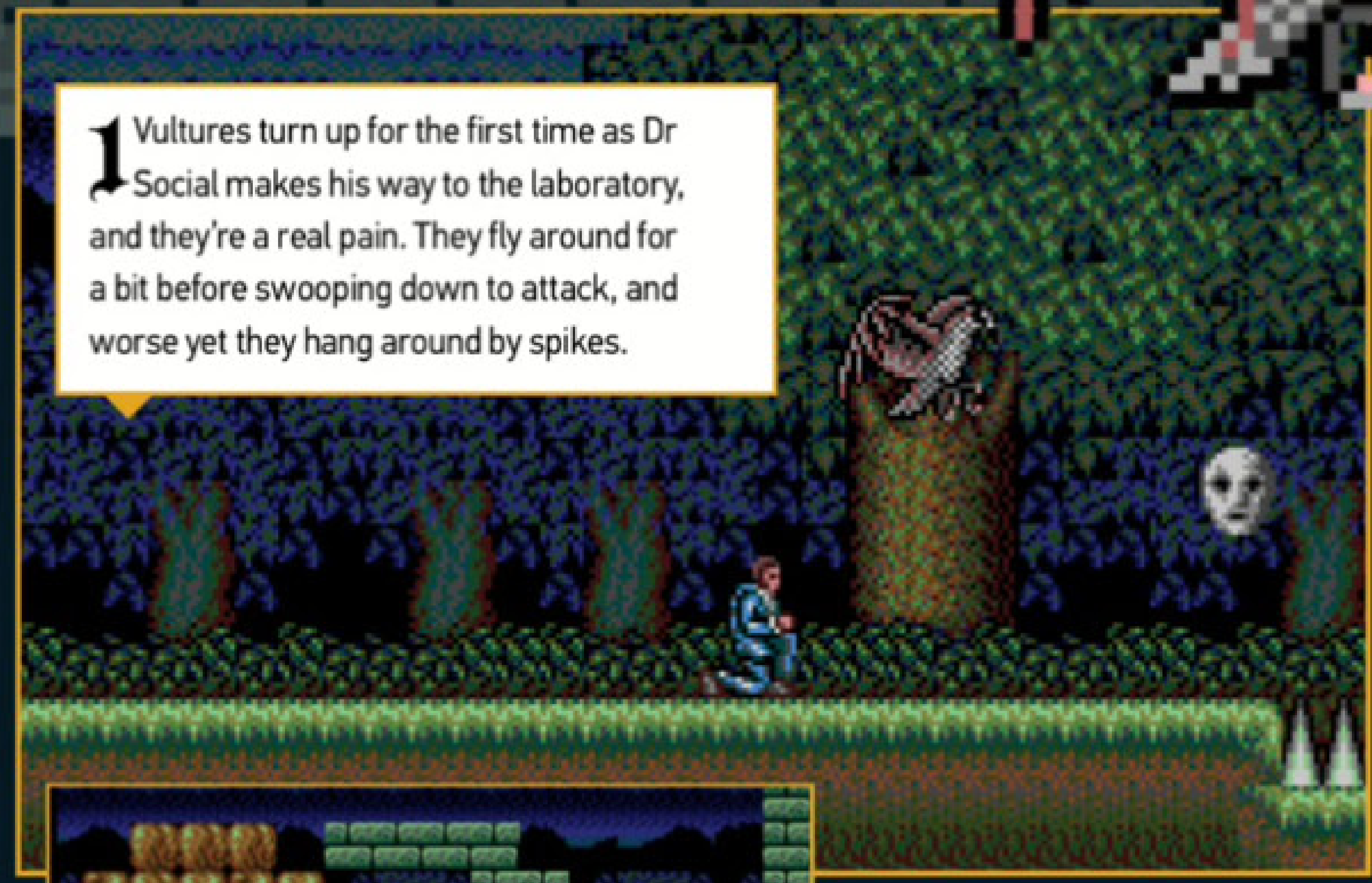


3 Once you reach the cathedral interior, you can take a staircase right to the top, or walk to the right for an alternative route. Go straight to the top only if you have a lot of health, as you'll definitely take some hits.

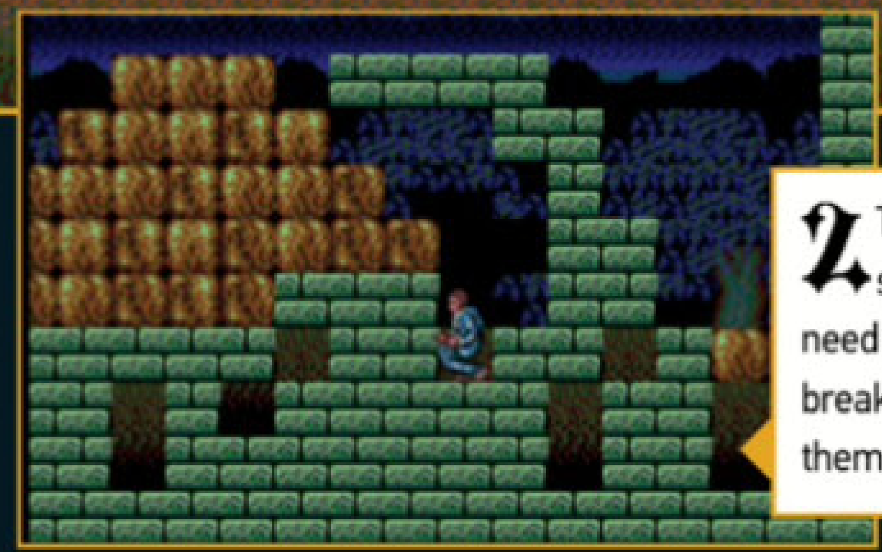


4 In the third stage, you can ride the pendulum in the clock tower. But you can't ride it past walls, so you'll need to use this one first to jump to the platform above, and then to move across the screen.

Act 4: Laboratory



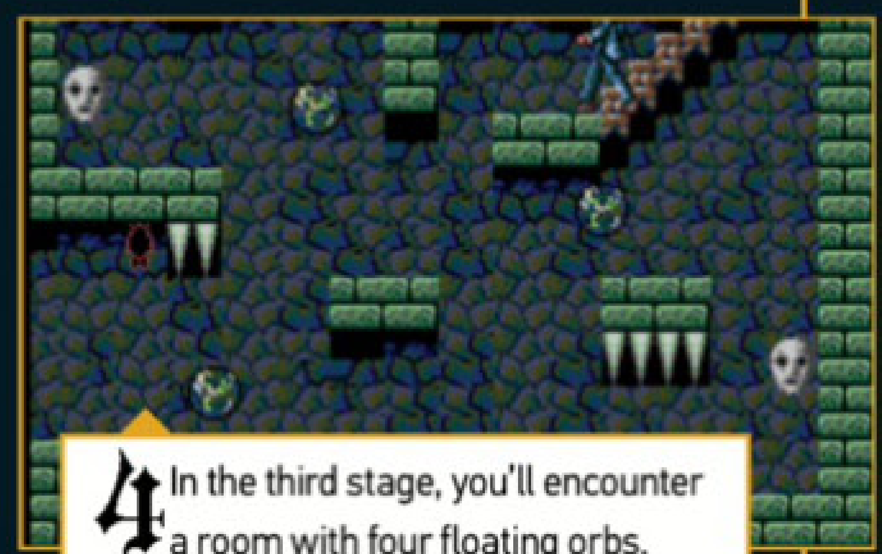
1 Vultures turn up for the first time as Dr Social makes his way to the laboratory, and they're a real pain. They fly around for a bit before swooping down to attack, and worse yet they hang around by spikes.



2 The obvious route out of the first stage is actually blocked, so you'll need to burrow your way through the breakable blocks to find an exit. Whack them all – you might find something nice.

3 Ambush rooms return in the second stage, but this time the enemies will spawn infinitely. To halt the attack and get out, locate the one enemy that isn't making a beeline for Dr Social's throat and find a way to destroy it.



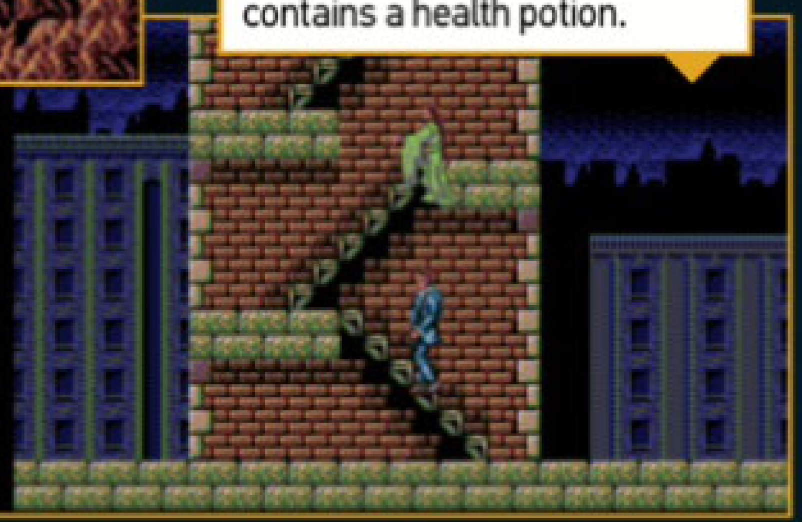


4 In the third stage, you'll encounter a room with four floating orbs. They look dangerous, but they're actually floating platforms that are essential to making your way onwards, so don't be afraid to touch them – just be warned that they change directions.

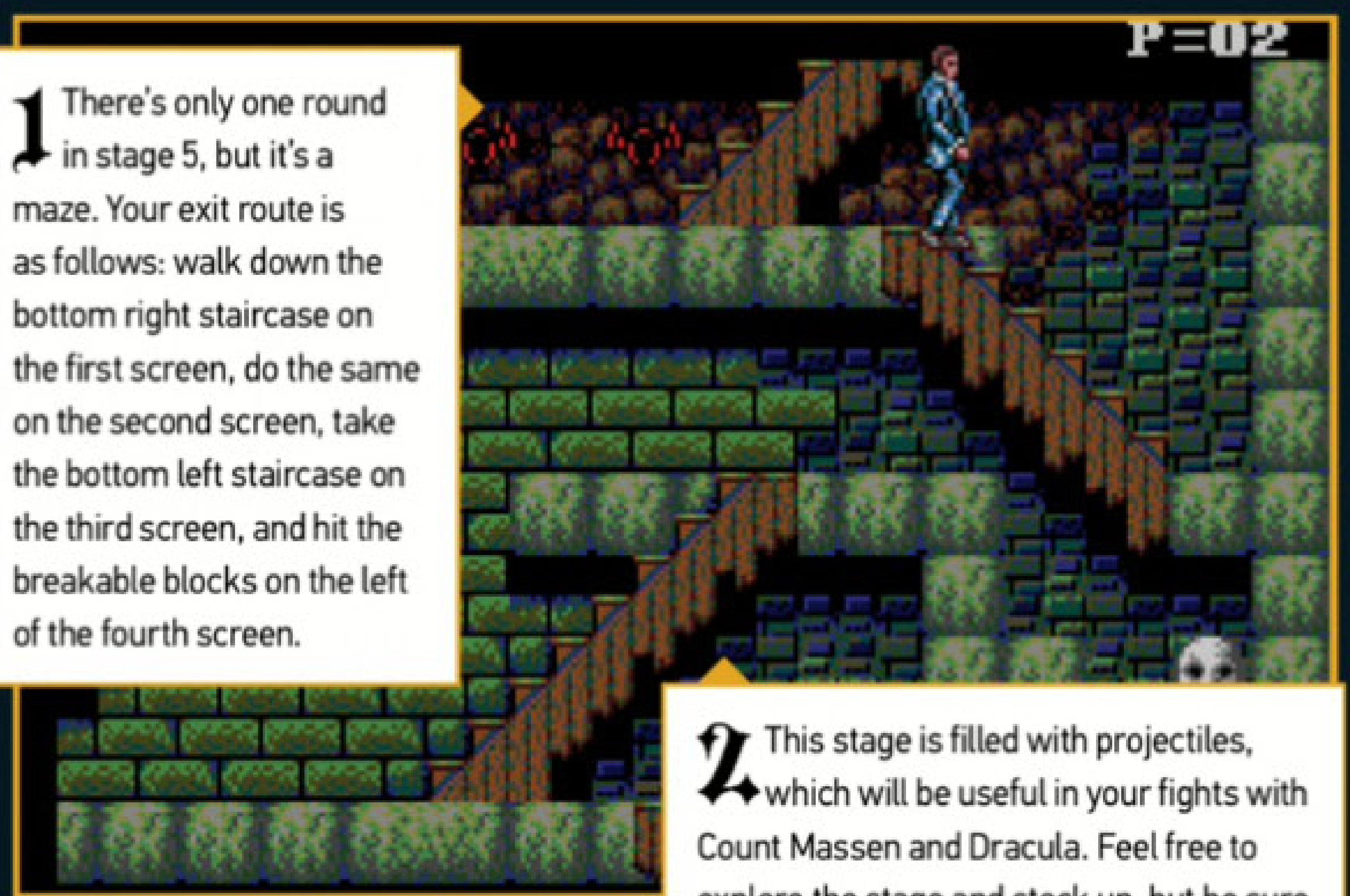


3 At the beginning of the second stage, you'll need to be fast on your feet as the initial set of platforms will fall down when stepped on. While visually indistinguishable, the ones that fall are single blocks so you are safe on wider platforms.

4 This tower in the third stage is well worth ascending twice, as there are two masks that reside at the top. The one on the left contains a very rare (and equally as useful) extra life, and the one on the right contains a health potion.



Act 5: In The Wake Of Dracula



1 There's only one round in stage 5, but it's a maze. Your exit route is as follows: walk down the bottom right staircase on the first screen, do the same on the second screen, take the bottom left staircase on the third screen, and hit the breakable blocks on the left of the fourth screen.

2 This stage is filled with projectiles, which will be useful in your fights with Count Massen and Dracula. Feel free to explore the stage and stock up, but be sure to track your route so you don't get lost!

AMSTRAD

GX 4000 25 YEARS ON

It has become a collector's machine with curiosity value but the Amstrad GX4000 console could have been so much more. David Crookes takes a look back at the console during its 25th anniversary year



The launch of the GX4000 in September 1990 had gone well. A party of 20 or so journalists from the UK jetted from London to Paris, had lunch in a conference room at the CNIT Centre and had seen three brand spanking new Amstrad machines. But the night before, the hacks had begun making their way to a restaurant in the Eiffel Tower to be wined and dined. "As we arrived, the heavens opened and there was a thunderstorm," Roland Perry, then Amstrad's group technical manager, tells us. "Everyone got drenched." And that, we can say with hindsight, was likely some sort of omen.

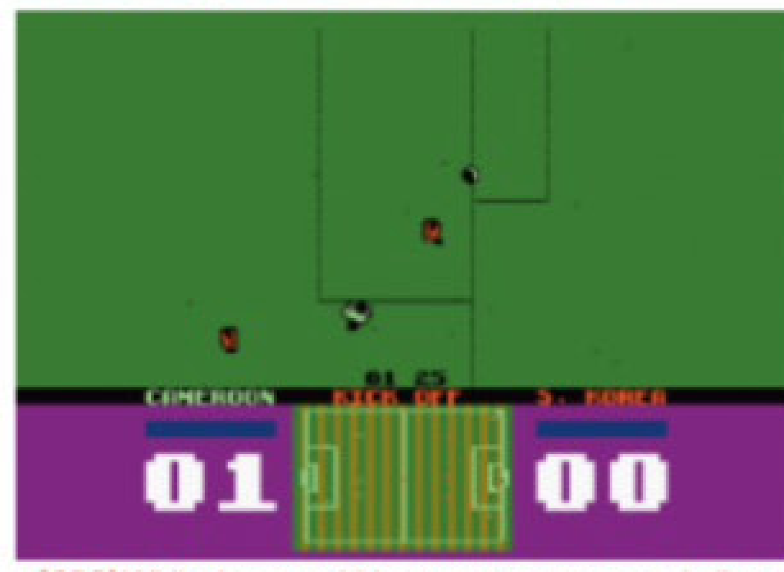
There is no getting around the fact that the GX4000 was a flop. Within eight months, it was being discounted and it wasn't long before it disappeared from shop shelves entirely. Amstrad may have traditionally predicted short shelf lives for its products, but this was nothing short of a disaster. Just 15,000 machines were sold over the course of its lifetime and the number of games it spawned only just surpassed a quick count of the fingers and toes of both hands and feet. Of those, some were either pulled before they made it to retail or they sold in so few numbers, the bulk of them were simply thrown away. There were some that got snapped up in what could loosely be termed 'droves' but they were few and far between. Yet for all of that, the GX4000 wasn't a complete waste of time.

For Amstrad just *had* to produce the GX4000 and dip its toe into new waters. In 1989, the company suffered a terrible year with profits slumping from £160 million to £76 million. There were problems with the PC2000, issues with the sales of video recorders and an abandonment of the audio systems market. The CPC was also stagnating after six years of sale and the company knew things had to change.

So when Alan Sugar announced in April 1990 that the firm would introduce one product every month, entering the console market was no real surprise. The NES and Master System were taking hold and Commodore was looking to produce its own console based on the C64. "The GX4000 was probably a 'me too' product. I'm not sure that the 'me too' products were ever as successful for us, but you have to try" says Roland. "It is where you see everyone else doing something successful and you think you have to have a go at it." ▶



» [GX4000] *Burnin' Rubber* was a brilliant racer for the GX4000, if only for its rather excellent graphics.



» [CPC] While there are 26 known games, experts believe *Gazza II* review code still exists and will show up one day.

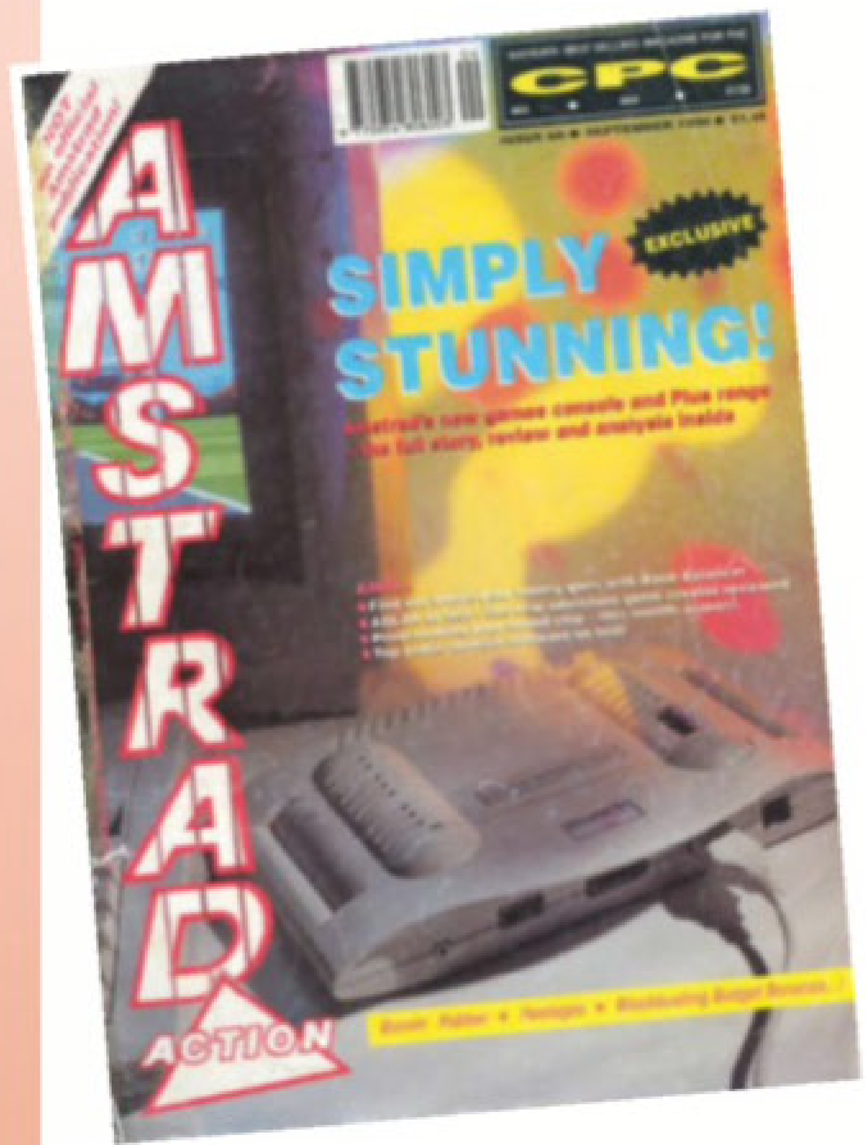


» [GX4000] *TinTin* was one of the many poor games that were created for or simply ported to the GX4000.

"The GX4000 was probably a 'me too' product. I'm not sure that the 'me too' products were ever as successful for us, but you have to try"

Roland Perry





Today, 25 years on, interest remains in the console. This year, a cartridge replacement for the GX4000 called the C4CPC was unveiled. Costing £60 and fitting directly into the slot of the console, it has a microSD card slot and a USB port that lets users connect it to a PC and copy files in the standard .cpr format. A menu allows the various games to be selected and played. The only caveat is that it consumes more power than a regular GX4000 and so, therefore, it needs a more capable power supply.

This interest has been going on for years, though, with unofficial cartridge games from *Blue Angel 69* to *Puzznic* and even bootlegs made available, although many of these are incompatible with the console. Sales of the GX4000 on eBay are healthy and it has become a collector's machine thanks to having two key attractions: it is easily possible to amass a complete collection of 26 games and yet some of the titles are so rare that it poses a good challenge. "It's actually, on face value, an ideal system to start collecting for," says Al aka 'Xyphoe' who runs gx4000.co.uk. "It's also nice to have collected for a system that not many people know about. It's like your own little find and secret."

When Amstrad launched the GX4000 in 1990 it wanted everyone to know about it. The console was unveiled alongside the 464 Plus and 6128 Plus computers, two machines based on the architecture of the CPC 464 and the CPC 6128. They came with either a built-in tape deck or a disc drive and 64k or 128k of memory and they also had a cartridge slot, turning the Pluses into computer-console hybrids. The GX4000 was fundamentally the Plus' cartridge section stuffed into its own mould.

The console made it to the cover of issue 106 of *C&VG* with Julian Rignall praising the 32 colours it could display on-screen. He compared the palette of 4,096 with the 16-bit Amiga and gushed: "The GX4000 is a graphically superb console, is technically far better than the Nintendo and Sega Master System and has a very exciting line-up of games in the not-too distant future." The months ahead for the GX4000 seemed bright.

"I thought the console was a good idea and looked terrific," affirms *Amstrad Action*'s former editor, Rod Lawton. Based on the Z80A processor with hardware sprites and scrolling, many pundits believed it would give its rivals a run for their money. Even today, first impressions are favourable. "I was impressed that Amstrad had thought about the practical uses, especially that it actually had a SCART socket but also that it was rather light in weight," says Al. "It was on the verge of feeling cheap, but it had enough power under the hood just the same as any of the oversized American and Japanese consoles."

> "It's nice to have collected a system that not many people know about. It's like your own little find and secret"
> Xyphoe

The console had been designed in the usual Amstrad way: the casing came first and the innards were made to fit. That had been the case with the CPC 464 where the keyboard, tape deck and case had been fixed in place before Roland had been asked to ensure the internals would squeeze in. "Bob Watkins' team designed the plastic," says Roland of the GX4000. "He must have thought the casing looked sexy or something."

To get the console to market in the easiest, cheapest and quickest possible manner, Amstrad retained the underlying CPC 8-bit architecture but, with the competition heating up from Nintendo and Sega as well as the Amiga and Atari ST, it knew it had to offer a little extra. It introduced hardware sprites, soft scrolling and the aforementioned expanded palette and that, it believed, would help take a good slice of what was shaping up to be a potentially lucrative market. "The sprites bought it into the same league as the Atari, Nintendo and Sega 8-bit machines," says coder Stuart Middleton. "Sadly, the Mega Drive and SNES were coming on to the scene which had much better hardware."

If Amstrad had considered going 16-bit, it was swiftly dismissed. "We couldn't have produced a ground-up 16-bit console," Roland says. "We didn't have the expertise. If someone waved a wand and said here is a Z80 and if you tickle it a little bit, it will turn into 16 bit processor then we'd have taken it," Roland adds. But there wasn't and Amstrad was not about to gamble. "We would have had to create the software and operating system from scratch and Amstrad was always about building on what had gone before," Roland continues.

AND THERE'S MORE!

How the Plus's games trumped the GX4000's

BASIC or machine code programmers were unable to take advantage of the extended palette, enhanced sound, sprite handling or hardware scrolling that were made available to cartridge games on the 464 Plus and 6128 Plus. Or at least, that was the case at first. Amstrad did not count on the talents of Serge Querne and the French Logon demo team which found ways of unlocking the extra features and making them available for general computing. It meant that the Plus machines had more enhanced games compared to the GX4000. Notable Plus-only titles include *Fluff*, *Lethal Moves*, *Prehistorik 2* and *Striker In The Crypts Of Trogan*. Check out the 2009 release of *Rick Dangerous* for the 6128 Plus, too.





x2 images © Al – Xyphoe

TECH SPECS







	AMSTRAD GX4000	NES	MASTER SYSTEM	MEGA DRIVE	C64GS
PROCESSOR	Zilog Z80A 4MHz	Motorola 6502 1.79MHz (1.66MHz PAL)	Zilog Z80 4MHz	Motorola 68000 7.67MHz	MPS Tech 8500 1MHz
RESOLUTION	160x200pxls (16 colours) 320x320pxls (4 colours) 640x200pxls (2 colours)	256x224 (NTSC) 256x239 PAL	256x192; 256x224 (256x240 PAL)	320x224, 256x224 320x240 (PAL) 256x240 (PAL)	320x200 60x200
PALETTE	4,096 colours	52 colours	64	512 colours	16 colours
SPRITES	16	64	Max 64	Up to 80	8
RAM	64K	2K	8K to 256K	64K	64K
AUDIO	30-channel stereo AY-3-8912 chip	5-channel PSG sound chip	4-channel mono Texas Instruments SN76489 (PSG)	6-channel FM, Yamaha YM2612	3 voices, 4 waveforms, MOS Technology 8580 SID



» Only 26 cartridge games were released for the GX4000 and some are quite expensive.



» A collection of bootlegs featuring games that were never originally released.

The GX4000 was a revolution for Amstrad. Every one of its machines, up until then, was designed to have a dual purpose but the GX4000 was built specifically for games. The problem was, despite the success Amstrad had had in gaming with the CPC, games did not run through its corporate blood. It heavily relied on the third-party developers from Ocean to Titus to Loriciels and Gremlin.

It was not for the want of trying. Amstrad threw its weight behind the machines, employing new sales representatives Jim Lindsay and Jim Whitton as part of an expansion of the telemarketing and sales team leading up to Christmas. It chose a low price point of £99 and it didn't make people buy a monitor. The company spent £20 million on marketing and the CPC press was also supportive, even if it had reservations. "We certainly pushed the machine as hard as we could," says Rod of the coverage given to the console in his magazine. "But this was when the ST and Amiga were in full flow. An 8-bit console no matter how cheap and whether or not it had dedicated graphics hardware looked that little bit too late. I remember Alan Sugar's delivery at the launch being pragmatic and low-key. He batted off questions about 8-bit versus 16-bit with the attitude that the technicalities didn't matter and it was the product and what it did that counted."

What is surprising, though, is that the marketing spend absolutely dwarfed the development costs. "Even when making a cartridge machine, I wouldn't have thought it would have been that costly," says Roland. "I would be astonished if the development cost was more than £500,000." But then the engineers at Amstrad were experienced in producing machines, although, as Roland says, "the question is do you get the support of the software and is it all priced correctly and all the rest of it? You can't sell something just because the hardware is clever."

To help drive the sales of the Pluses and the GX4000, Amstrad bundled a game called *Burnin' Rubber* to give customers something to play as soon as they got the machine out of the box. It didn't go according to plan since *Amstrad Computer User* magazine reported in March 1991 that some people were having trouble finding the cartridge – users had to remove the console and the paddles, then turn the bottom layer of polystyrene upside down.

Made by Ocean Software, it looked amazing with great use of the console's extra colours. Robert Hunter was tasked with creating the graphics which boasted subtle shading, detailed cars and some fantastic crash scenes. Added to smooth 3D scrolling and the hardware sprites used for the player's car and the shadow beneath it, the game became a perfect advert for the console's capabilities.

"The GX4000 was so different to the standard CPC," says Robert. "I was hired as a 16-bit artist for Atari ST and Amiga, though I'd had no problem working with the Amstrad. The console could handle a fantastic colour palette, similar to Amiga and ST. The only downside was that it still used chunky colour pixels so it was just as blocky as the CPC in the 32-colour mode."

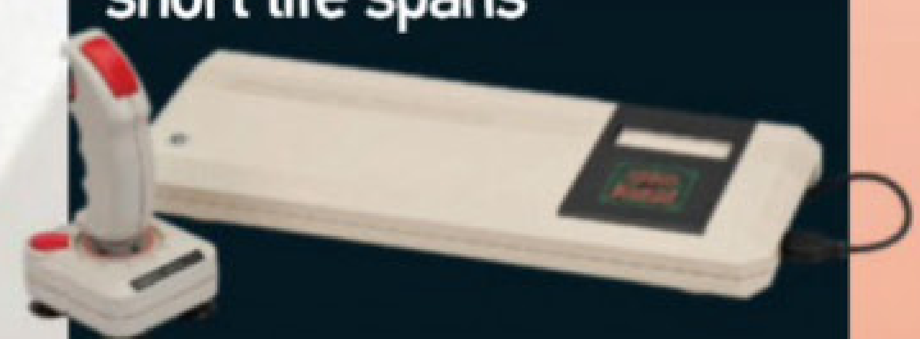
Robert worked with coder John 'Jobbee' O'Brien on the game while Matthew Cannon and Jon Dunn were responsible for the music and sounds. Robert and John had worked on the CPC version of *WEC Le Mans* together so ▶



» Is it just us or does the GX4000 look strikingly like one of the Snowspeeders from *Empire*?

LIGHTS OUT

5 Other Systems with short life spans



COMMODORE 64GS

■ Essentially removing the keyboard of a Commodore 64 and adding a cartridge slot, the 64GS was released in time for Christmas 1990 but it barely shifted 20,000 units and it was soon discontinued.

VIRTUAL BOY



■ Launched in Japan in July 1995 and pulled from the country's retailers five months later, the Virtual Boy wasn't a bad machine. There were even some decent games like *Wario Land*. Punters decided it was too wacky or ahead of its time, though.

COLECOVISION

■ It may have been popular, racking up a million sales inside a year, but the ColecoVision, which launched in 1982, was troubled by the videogame crash of 1983 and it caused Coleco to begin scaling down production before scrapping the machine entirely in 1985. Still, it shifted more than two million units in total.



APPLE PIPPIN

■ Apple tried to muscle in on the console market in 1995. But the company's name was nothing like it is today, and with no queues of excited fans around the block, this system blimped through to 1997 before being ultimately axed.



GIZMONDO

■ Many celebrities endorsed this handheld, released in March 2005. But bizarre legalities concerning Gizmondo executive Stefan Eriksson hit the headlines and it failed to get traction. It sold less than 25,000 units and was discontinued in February 2006.



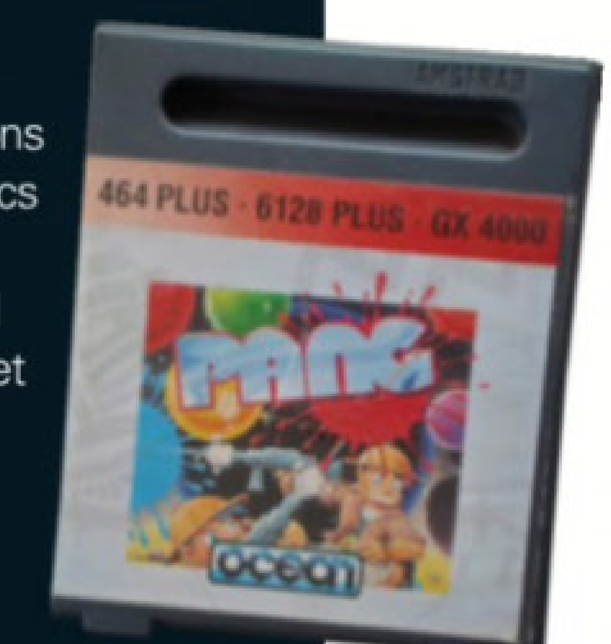


BURSTING WITH FUN

Stuart Middleton programmed the arcade conversion of Pang for the GX4000

Was the GX4000 a pleasurable console to program?
I personally really liked the GX4000. I think the addition of hardware sprites and scrolling was what made it exciting. I had previously only really worked on the ZX Spectrum, the original Amstrad range and PCs, none of which had sprites. We used the Amstrad Plus and an editor called Brief on the PC. Later on, we used an EPROM emulator which was essentially a cartridge with the game ROM removed and RAM added, which we could program directly from a PC. Art was converted into blocks of hex numbers and compiled into the cartridge image alongside the code. It was very simplistic and there were no luxuries like source debugging. We simply wrote the code, downloaded it and hit the reset button and hoped for the best.

***Pang* was arguably the best looking and sounding 8-bit conversion around at the time– did you have to adopt any particular techniques?**
We had a couple of good artists – Paul Walker and John Harrison – who were great at 8-bit art. John in particular was amazing at getting character animations in a few pixels. We copied the original arcade graphics very closely too. Using techniques I'd developed to get the most out of underpowered 8-bit machines, I was able to mix hardware and software sprites to get everything on screen that we needed. I remember doing a lot of optimisation to make sure it ran smoothly. The audio was given out to a third party sound engineer (I can't remember which one), but we always used excellent musicians.



Collision detection was unforgiving at times. What do you think could be attributed to this?
Collision detection was always an issue with the game. Doing pixel perfect collision wasn't possible as we didn't have the processing power to use this technique. I experimented with other types but in the end we didn't have to time to implement them. I don't remember the technique I used in the end, but I was never happy with it. It did spawn a saying around the office, though. Every time someone died from a bad collision you'd hear the shout of: "Call the collision police!"

Could Amstrad have done anything to improve their machine or was it doomed from the start?
I'm not sure what Amstrad's thinking was with the hardware design but I suspect it didn't want to change the hardware radically from its previous machines and needed to maintain backward compatibility. If it wasn't for this, Amstrad could have gone with a 16-bit CPU such as the 68000. This would have greatly improved the console's potential. The video hardware was similar to the other consoles of around that era, but seriously lacking compared to consoles such as the Mega Drive, for example. I think that Amstrad underestimated the competition that they were facing and were looking backwards rather than forwards with their hardware design.



» One thing that's great about the GX4000 is that it outputs in lovely crisp RGB.

▶Ocean gave them full control over the design of *Burnin' Rubber*. "We basically did an unofficial *WEC Le Mans* with the features we could not do on the CPC, like the colour changes as day turns to night that were in the arcade game. I spent a lot of time working out the palettes for each stage of the day, then John did an amazing job of blending them together."

The utilisation of the hardware sprites, Robert adds, "allowed us to do large objects made of multiple sprites that could emulate the tumbling car crash from the orginal arcade game," Jon came up with this brilliant ruse to be able to scale the objects on the fly – normally the coders would store different sized versions, but Jon's method could scale the objects at a faster rate. The game also made use of the console's raster interrupt feature. This meant that, at any line down the screen, the programmer could stop and reload sprites. "It probably allowed for the flame trail on the tyre and scrolling text simultaneously," says Robert.

***Burnin' Rubber* was one of a number of GX4000 titles which formed part of a demonstration unit placed in retailers such as** Dixons in the UK. It allowed players to sample the console's games and served to whet the public's appetite. The unit was also sent to France where companies such as Titus Interactive and Loriciels were keen to test the new market given the huge CPC 6128 user base in France. "I was at the presentation," says Loriciels producer Vincent Baillet. "It was very promising."

Some of the games were terrible. While *Pro Tennis Tour* (Ubisoft) and *Tennis Cup 2* (Loriciels) enhanced the graphics when they were ported to the GX4000, some titles made little effort to use the extra capabilities of the GX4000 and titles like *Copter 271* were dire. The same was true of *Batman*, *Operation Thunderbolt*, *Barbarian II* as well as *Klax*, and straight ports led many to question the benefits of splashing out £24.99 for a cartridge version. Worse, games were only trickling into the shops – or at least into *some* shops. In March 1991, there was talk of a cartridge crisis and Amstrad was criticised because it had the manufacturing rights and it was seen to be the cause for the delays. The GX4000 was reduced in price to £79.95.

And yet there were many positives. *Navy Seals* used the enhanced features well and was a brilliant game and *Pang* was the best example of utilising the hardware, making extensive use of hardware sprites. *Robocop 2* was another gem; programmed by Andrew Deakin with graphics by Ivan Horn, it was a game that was unavailable on a standard CPC and it was not only beautiful to look at with great use of hardware sprites and scrolling, but it was fast and, to coin a cliché, furious, too.

"To produce the graphics, I used Ocean's in-house graphics and map editor which ran on the Atari ST," says Ivan. "As far as I remember, the coding was done on the ST with it then being run on dev kits of the hardware that Amstrad supplied." The plan had been for the team to create four versions, adding the Spectrum, ST and Amiga to the list but the game had to be created in ten months which left them short of time. Six months into the project, the ST and Amiga versions were given to Special FX in Liverpool. "I handed over

» There are just two buttons on the GX4000: the power switch and a pause button.







the artwork that I had for the GX4000 and a chunk of it ended up in the Special FX's versions," says Ivan who confesses that neither he nor Andrew had any experience on 16-bit machines. "The GX4000 was probably fairly close from a graphics point of view and I think that it didn't get the kind of sales and attention that it deserved," Ivan adds.


» *Toki* never actually appeared on the GX4000 even though it was claimed to be coming.

For those working at Amstrad the GX4000 would have been a personal success. Even though Al would contest that the console should have been released two years earlier and licensed to a US company for the Stateside market,

> "The console could handle a fantastic colour palette, similar to Amiga and ST"
> Robert Hunter

Roland insists, "at least everything we said we would do we did on time and on budget." He adds, "in a lot of companies only 20 per cent of the twinkles of the eye got into the shops. We knew that it was going to end up in the shops. It was rewarding to see something you started through to the end, though."

The GX4000 remains a piece of gaming history and Al has been keeping an eye on the games. "Rare ones go for more than £100," he says. He highlights *Chase HQ II*, which only two copies are known to be in existence. "It's taken me more than ten years to complete my collection to the point of just needing the lightgun, *Chase HQ II* and *Gazza II*." But this is just one of the joys of the GX4000 and one that Amstrad may not have envisioned happening." The GX4000 was never going to take over the world," says Al. But it's taking over the hearts of many a collector. ✱

With many thanks to Al aka 'Xyphoe': Check out his website, gx4000.co.uk, and his YouTube channel at youtube.com/user/Xyphoe



CLASSIC MOMENTS

Tusker

» **PLATFORM:** COMMODORE 64 » **DEVELOPER:** SYSTEM 3 » **RELEASED:** 1989

By the time you've reached the third stage of *Tusker*, you're a bit wise to some of the game's nastier surprises. You've already been run over by a creature you've been fleeing, earned some free facial realignment surgery courtesy of some angry barbarians, and even had monkeys throw various objects at you. But in the third stage, you come across an large green neck with what appears to be a head on the end of it. Nessie, is that you? Nope, it's probably a long-lost dinosaur – and next to it is something for you to pick up.

It looks pretty docile, so you wander up to it and try to collect the item. Bad move. The titanic creature angles its neck and takes a good hard chomp out of your side, killing you instantly and leaving you on your last life. Reasoning that even your machete isn't going to have sufficient range, you pull out a slingshot and hope for the best. The explosive decapitation that follows is both surprising and delightful – now, on to the temple! *



BIO

The world of film provided a rich source of inspiration for developers of the Eighties, and it was one System 3 drew from for the *Indiana Jones*-esque action of *Tusker*. The company had already experienced huge success in the arcade adventure genre with *The Last Ninja* and its sequel, and *Tusker* preserved some of that series' key aspects while forging its own distinct style. *Tusker* was a late star of the 8-bit scene, receiving many high scores including 90% from *Zzap!* and 83% from *CVG*, but the Atari ST and Amiga versions never hit the same critical heights.



MORE CLASSIC TUSKER MOMENTS

Sharp Shooter

For the busy adventurer who has time for only the most brisk of murders, this one-hit killer pistol is a real boon – especially given that you start the game carrying only your fists to defend yourself with. Watch out, though, as the enemies in the first stage will become more aggressive once you've snagged it and your ammunition is limited.



Colossal Cave Adventure

A foray into the caves during the first stage of the game gives you your first sojourn into new scenery, taking you from the desert to a rather cooler area. It's much appreciated, not least because of your constant thirst, although the chance to stab up a crocodile is also worthwhile – particularly as a map and a machete lie beyond it.



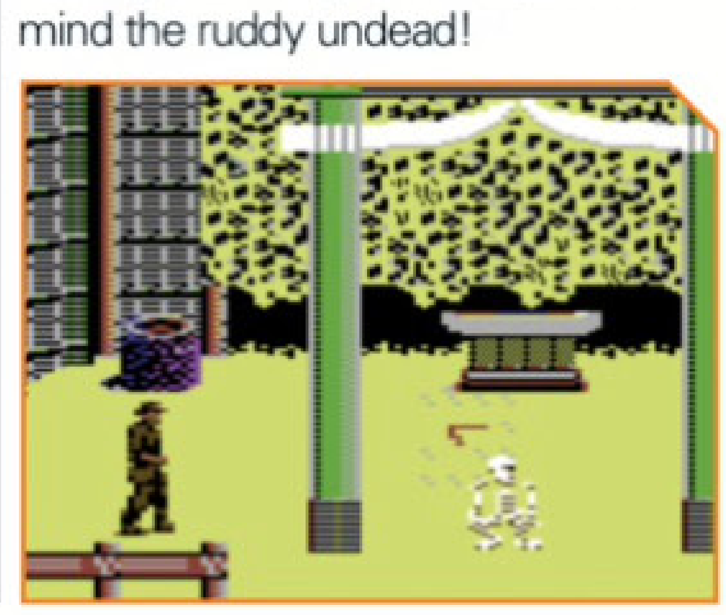
Arbitrary And Capricious

One of the most memorable parts of *Tusker* is your encounter with this rather joyless green giant in stage 2. As you walk across his underground hiding place, he attacks you without any forewarning and immediately kills you. The game over screen here is your clue – walking slowly and quietly so as not to wake it and incur its wrath is the key to success.



They Live!

In the first stage, enemies will always start the stage on-screen, roaming around hoping to cut our protagonist in two. In the second stage, they begin to get more tricky – particularly these skeletons, which just happen to reassemble into full people as you wander past them. It's hard enough dealing with living enemies, never mind the ruddy undead!



DUNGEON KEEPER

Being evil had seldom been more fun than in the claustrophobic confines of Dungeon Keeper 1 and 2. David Crookes trains up and puts the screws on the developers to find out how the classic games were made

They say bad guys never win but Peter Molyneux decided this wasn't necessarily a good thing. He had been making games since 1982, producing gems such as *Populous* and *Syndicate*, but in the 15 years that had passed, it dawned on him that gamers never got to play the baddie. And that was something he had to change.

His answer was a dark riff on a real-time strategy and management game. Three years earlier, he led *Theme Park*, a game in which players would try to build an entertainment complex. By taking elements of that game and combining it with the world building attributes of *Populous* and the carnage witnessed in *Syndicate*, a fresh offering emerged.

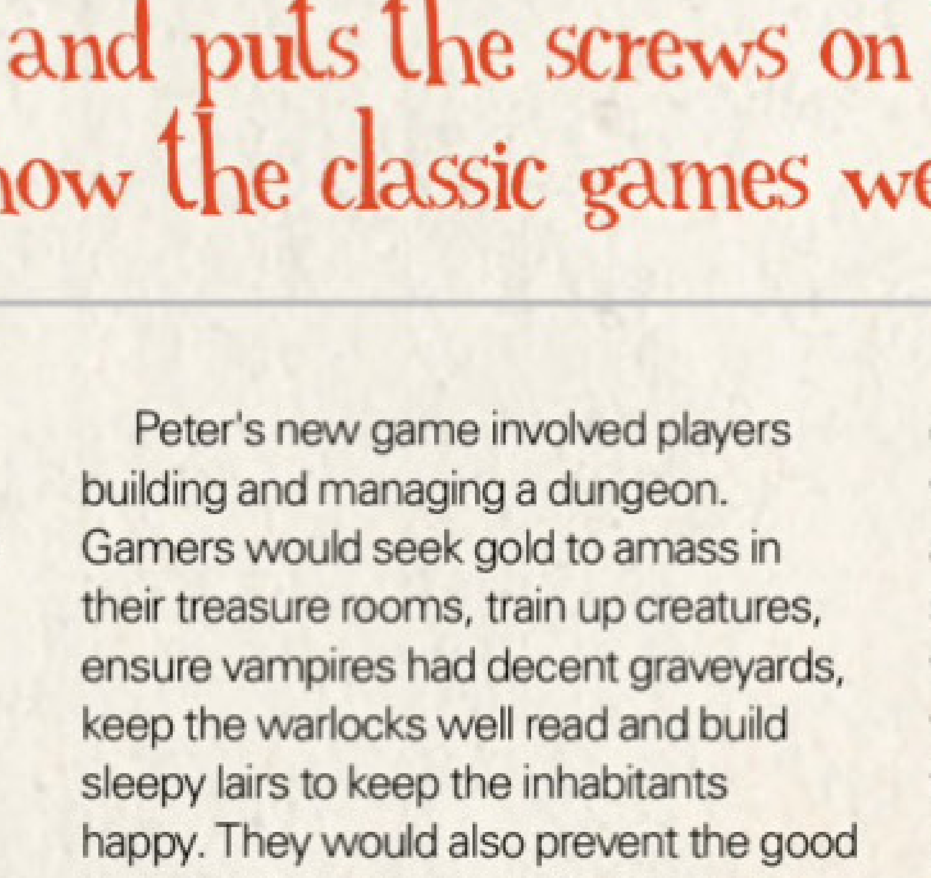
Peter's new game involved players building and managing a dungeon. Gamers would seek gold to amass in their treasure rooms, train up creatures, ensure vampires had decent graveyards, keep the warlocks well read and build sleepy lairs to keep the inhabitants happy. They would also prevent the good guys from breaking in and spoiling the party. It turned the idea of players looking to conquer a dungeon on its head.

"The idea was predominantly Peter's and it came from the group playing a lot of war board games at the time with a lot of really interesting play dynamics going on," says programmer and co-designer Jonty Barnes. "He started to think of players building dungeons and moving around in them and from that came the thinking, 'well, what if you were the evil person in the dungeon and all of these do-gooders, knights and so on were coming in and destroying what you valued? What if they believed what they were doing was great and yet they had no business being within your underworld, your private domain with you nurturing monsters and building your life underground with gold?'"

A small team was assembled primarily consisting of lead artist and co-designer Mark Healey, lead programmer Simon Carter, and designer and artist Barry Meade. "I don't remember Peter being around much initially, I think he was doing PR duties or something," recalls Mark. "We spent quite a bit of time just messing around with the idea but not ▶

(PC) Mining gold and taking it to your treasure room is the best way to enrich your dungeon kingdom.







(PC) The Training Room looks gruelling but you will need it to level up your creatures.

(PC) This is the Overworld. it's too pleasant for you which is why you are the evil beneath the ground



KNOW YOUR FOE

Some of the many monsters in your employ







getting very far in terms of a design. We concentrated on getting an engine running – the Bullfrog process was very much 'make it up as we go along.'"

The team took the engine from *Magic Carpet* and came up with a primitive version of the game. "The earliest version was literally the ability to scroll around a map and go into third-person," says Jonty. "I think we had one rock texture and Simon had made a Lego brick map editor kind of thing while he was looking at torches on walls and navigation systems. We were developing the actual idea in tandem, including multiplayer, and it was always a case of play and innovate."

But that first stab was thrown out and the process started from scratch. "Peter made a very basic 2D, top-down prototype, which we integrated into the nicer engine," says Mark. The new prototype contained many of the elements that would make the final cut and Peter fiddled with the minor details. The gameplay focussed on carving out the dungeon, creating useful rooms such as a Torture Chamber for the sadistic Dark Mistress and keeping everyone happy so stop them wandering away.

"In Peter's prototype, the basic room types – the Treasure Room, Feeding Room, Training Room and Dungeon Heart – were there," says Mark. "There



(PC) Players create rooms by clicking icons and finding suitable locations.



(PC) Big, fat and able to turn into Dragons, the Bile Demons are very useful monsters.





were resource numbers that could affect each other but things like the Torture Room were added later and ideas kind of suggested themselves. Peter was obsessed with having the balancing variables in spreadsheet form – he'd spend lots of time playing around in that spreadsheet."

Still, the game needed refinement. Simon led the project for a while and new members were added including Simon's brother, Dean. Mark designed every character in the game and the vast bulk of the art content ("I was the only artist working on the game for most of development," he says). Yet it floundered. Jonty took a year out to finish his degree at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. "When I came back, *Dungeon Keeper* had 'reset' it was back to where we were when I'd left off," he says. "But there were more tools and more technology in place."

One key implementation was a navigation system that had proven difficult to develop given its complexity and the relative low power of the time's PCs. "Ian Shaw was a super smart guy from Cambridge and he came in and created this system," says Jonty. But Peter redefined the way the game would play. "He turned the Imps up to something like ten times their speed and gave the player the ability to remove three-by-three blocks – a corridor width," says Jonty. "That changed the intensity of the gameplay, making everything else seem much better. It was quite the pivotal moment for *Dungeon Keeper*."

Artificial Intelligence was also crucial. "We needed the creatures to be complex, fight well and be readable while having very low computational costs," says Jonty. "A lot depended on the AI, though, including the navigation. It had to be very daring in the way that it recalculated what it wanted to do but the imps were a pleasure."

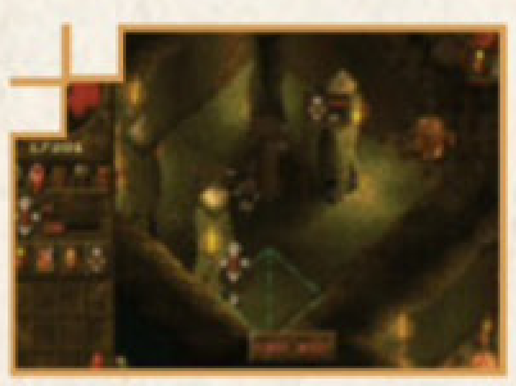
Players could upgrade monsters with training rooms that allowed them to become stronger. Research could be carried out, too. "We needed stats to play with," says Mark, "so the strength of your units was a pretty obvious and basic one to have. Deciding what room would match the player manipulating these stats was simple, too, as we knew the setting."

A **joy of bossing the Imps around was being able to hit them to work faster using the in-game hand** controller. This was Mark's idea. "I spent ages making a mock up animation of the big hand slapping things – I have a dark humour, and ideas like that come fast and furious to me."

The hand icon let the player feel immersed in the game. "It was an extension of you – physically slapping creatures felt like it was your hand reaching into the universe," says Jonty. "It created personality and allowed you to directly manipulate the creatures and monsters in a way that made sense. It was a great design decision."

A lot of time in development was also spent refining the user interface. Dean went through dozens of versions looking at the various ways rooms could be built more easily and trying to make the game's left-side panel easier to read and understand. He wanted the mouse to travel the least distance possible and make the submenus understandable. Dean even experimented with no on-screen panel at all. "The game looked so much better when there wasn't a UI, but we gave in and had the panel down the left of the screen," Jonti recalls.

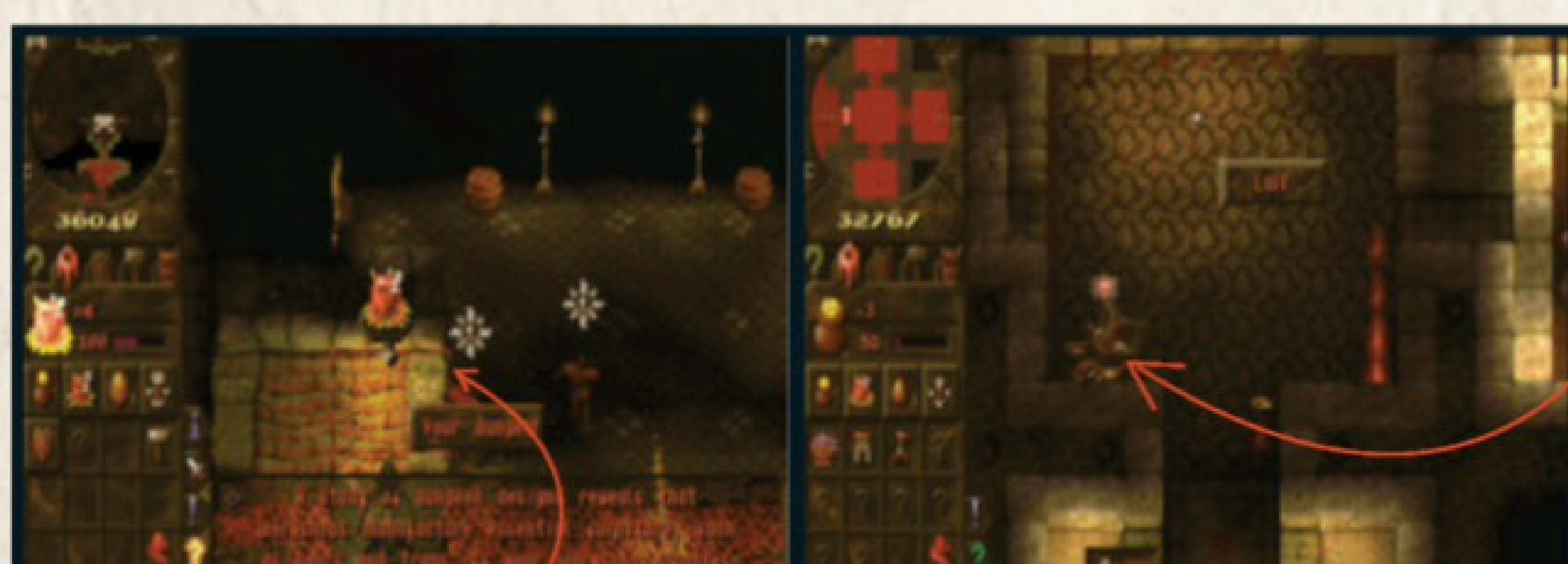
The focus was intense. Ken Malcolm only worked on the development team for three weeks producing a multiplayer map but around 85 per cent of it ended up in the final game. Andy Robson was the testing manager for a ▶



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** ELECTRONIC ARTS
- **DEVELOPER:** BULLFROG PRODUCTIONS
- **RELEASED:** 1997/1999
- **PLATFORM:** PC
- **GENRE:** REAL-TIME STRATEGY/ DUNGEON MANAGEMENT

> "We spent quite a bit of time just messing around with the idea but not getting very far in terms of a design" Mark Healey



(PC) It's time for Horny to take a little rest. Dungeons are hard work.

(PC) Helpful tips are dished out as you play, helping you to make better sense of what you're doing

SLEEPING ON THE JOB

How Molyneux's home became a workplace



As *Dungeon Keeper* progressed, Peter decided that he wanted to leave Bullfrog to set up Lionhead Studios. EA felt he would be a distraction and it asked him to leave its offices, but he wanted to continue working on the game. For the final year, the development continued at Peter's house, in an office above a garage.

Some of the development team slept at the house as the game's production continued and Peter's commute to work was reduced to around ten footsteps from his lounge to the office. The team would play the game in their free time. "Peter would often cheat using some secret key to give himself more resource, which was a bit naughty," says Mark. "My cheating would involve going over to his desk and stealing his mouse."

Jonty laughs: "We would play the game at night drinking beers, arguing over who should have won based on how the game should be versus the way it was. If somebody won too easily we would change the design the following day and that really honed the intensity and the strategy of building *Dungeon Keeper*. We ended up working pretty much six or seven days a week for a long period of time but we didn't notice because we cared so much about what we were creating."



(PC) By possessing a creature you can view your dungeon from the eyes of your minion. The graphics are not great but it's gives a better view



BUILDING A BETTER DUNGEON

1. The best tip, says Jonty Barnes, is to "think about your layout." He adds: "Don't just plough in and continue. Think about which rooms you want to put nearer to enemies and work out where the gold is on the map."

2. Build a Treasure Room close to the mines. This way, the Imps are able to gather the gold and quickly deposit it thanks to the short distance.

3. Tester Andy Robson had a winning tactic. "He said once you had The Reaper, you could go into first-person and into somebody's dungeon," says Jonty. "He would leap so fast and he would be able to destroy the Dungeon Heart."

4. Make sure to gain access to the Portal quickly. By doing so, you will be able entice creatures such as the Bile Demons to your dungeon.

5. Train and equip your creatures well. This ensures they become more effective. Provide the right facilities for your creatures; make sure that Warlocks have a library and Mistresses have the best torture chambers.

6. "Don't over stretch your real estate," suggests Jonty. "If you can't reinforce your walls, then you're going to be vulnerable to other players."

7. Keep an eye on the Bile Demons. If you train them up to a skill level of ten, then you will be able to put them into the training room. Give them some time and they will transform themselves into more useful Dragons.

8. If you want to save cash, it is possible to hand minions gold before they go to the Treasure Room. You can short change them by doing this.

▶ month ("he did a very thorough and painstaking job of getting the curve right and knowing where we needed to hold hands or not," recalls Mark). Mark storyboarded the animated intro and Darren Thomas created it. Indeed, the game's production was faster and more efficient. "We bounced ideas off of each other all the time," says Jonty.

They could also be eccentric. Peter threw a failing printer out of the window and hit it with a hammer and Mark spent time arguing with Dean about anything ("I loved winding him up," he recalls). Level designer and network programmer Alex Peters had a table in the room with a lamp and slippers on it. "He made a lounge of his desk," ribs Jonty. "And we thought he was the sensible one."

This fun reflected in the character creation, the audio realisation, the designs and the traps for any would be intruders. "I remember the rolling boulder being a fun one," says Mark. "I remember coming up with the grenades that were screaming tongue flicking creatures that would explode and burst. But they weren't traps, they were weapons you could use if you were possessing a creature."

When the player possessed a creature, the action switched to first-person – "that was my favourite bit," says Mark – and it allowed a different perspective on the dungeon and the monsters that roamed it. "Horny was powerful, yet dangerous and liked playing with fire," says Mark. "The Bile Demon was cool, too. I liked his costume with the big chains coming of his nipples connecting to a thong – really seedy gross stuff. I had a special place in my heart for The Mistress. We could have had much more fun with that character."

One of the most recognisable 'characters' was The Mentor. British actor Richard Ridings, who has also worked on *Quake III*, provided the richly comedic voiceover narration which set the scene. Russell Shaw was responsible for the game's music and sound. "This came much later in the process," says Mark. "I remember Russ recording me playing guitar for the intro."





The game was widely praised even though Jonty wishes that there was more time to work on the fighting. "When you look at the dynamics of real-time strategies, I think that you can make big combat far more visceral and far more intelligent," he says.

The chance to improve came with *Dungeon Keeper 2*. EA was keen to capitalise on the debut's success and Nick Goldsworthy was appointed the sequel's producer. "With Peter moving from Bullfrog, we established a new team that included members of the original development crew," he says. "This allowed us to approach *Dungeon Keeper 2* with fresh eyes as well as a sense of ownership. When Colin Robinson joined Bullfrog and became head of the studio, he proved instrumental to the project's success and he really helped us to take *Dungeon Keeper 2* to that next level."

Nick had a clear idea of the mechanics that made the franchise such a success. "The pressure was really about carrying over the original *Dungeon Keeper* experience that the players that loved while adding something new to keep it interesting for them," says Nick.

A project manager was hired from outside the gaming industry. Motor group Mitsubishi helped the team to improve the management of their delivery milestones. "It taught us a great deal of being able to apply the practices used by other major companies to game development," says Nick.

Even though Mark had done a wonderful job with the graphics of the first game, the look of *Dungeon Keeper* changed to keep up with the current trends. "We knew that we would have to create a full 3D game using hardware acceleration," Nick explains. "The artists worked hard to improve the quality and then spent hours making it perfect. *Dungeon Keeper 2* was a labour of love for the team and you can sense that when you are playing it," says Nick.

Five team members worked on the game's audio. Mark Knight scored the music and created variations of each track to match the pace of gameplay. Nick Laviers, head of audio, guided the team to keep a cohesive style. Adele Kellet, Matthew Thurling and Elain Williams created the sound effects. "They used methods similar to what the BBC uses for their radio effects, for example, fiercely chopping a cabbage

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Taking promotion to the extreme

When Nick Goldsworthy took over development of *Dungeon Keeper 2* he flogged himself hard. Or at least, somebody else did. He was pencilled in for an interview on the Channel 4 *Bits* show and he flew to Scotland with Leilani Dowding, the former Miss UK, who cosplayed as the promotional character, The Mistress, for the interview.

"The TV crew took me to a building site, put me into medieval stocks, and during the interview process they filmed me being whipped by The Mistress while I was bent over and shackled. I can't believe I agreed to that," says Nick. "If any reader has a copy of that show please send me a copy and then burn all the evidence!"



(PC) Many of the rooms from the original Dungeon Masterreturned but were graphically enhanced.

> "I liked his costume with the big chains coming of his nipples connecting to a thong – really seedy gross stuff"
> Mark Healey



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

POPULOUS (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 1989

SYNDICATE
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 1993

THEME PARK
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 1994



with a knife was used as the sound effect for a beheading.

The developers also made good use of the latest Direct X support and worked to improve the lighting and the special effects. "Andy Cakebread was an R&D engineer whose function was just to produce the game's special effects," Nick says. "It was cool to see what new ideas and cool visual treats he would come up with."

Dungeon Keeper 2 was not merely a continuation of the first game and it emphasised offensive strategies over defensive. Attracting new monsters to your dungeon and managing them was still a priority, though.

"We wanted to reduce the feeling of ambiguity when it came to looking after your dungeon, tighten up areas like the combat system and look into how things interacted with one another," explains Nick. "This certainly helped in giving more transparency to how systems worked to the player, so less guess work was involved overall."

As a result, the UI was tweaked to ensure there were always plenty of rewards. "Chuck Clanton really helped with this flow and the user interface," says Nick. "And the level design headed by David Amor and Shintaro Kanaoya worked with this flow to really help us learn more about where we should and shouldn't go within the game."

The game also had a mode that allowed the building of dungeons without risk of invasion. "During the development, testers played levels without the invaders. It was a relaxing experience. In turn this became My Pet Dungeon and a full feature of the game," says Nick. Effort was also put into multiplayer which had always been love/hate experience with the original. It proved to be a key feature to improve and something the team worked hard on. It went down well upon release and plans were put in place for *Dungeon Keeper 3*. The idea was to merge the underground with the 'above' world but EA was changing direction and focusing on new franchises. *Harry Potter* became all-important and a lot of the *Dungeon Keeper* team moved to work on it.

"We introduced a third race and we had worked on some technical design for building castle structures," laments Nick. The game and the franchise has always stuck with him. He says it became a labour of love both to play and make. "Anytime EA changes its mind, I'm ready to jump right in for *Dungeon Keeper 3*," he says. *



(PC) Watching your army of Imps dig out new dungeon rooms can be surprisingly therapeutic.

BETTER THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

The games that Dungeon Keeper went on to influence

LEGO ROCK RAIDERS PC

This was claimed by some to be the ultimate sequel to *Dungeon Keeper*. The gameplay revolved around digging and building and it had top-down and first-person views. The big difference was that it featured Lego minifigures and its 25 missions were a treat.



STARTOPIA PC

Mucky Foot Productions, a developer made up of ex-Bullfrog staff created a management sim with a delicious array of alien creatures. At first glance it appeared that they'd taken *Dungeon Keeper* and set it in space. In many ways they kind of did, but it was much harder.



EVIL GENIUS PC

Elixir was founded by Demis Hassabis who worked with Peter Molyneux and *Evil Genius* was its second game. Giving gamers control of a *Bond*-style lair, henchmen were hired to build military, scientific or social installations while the player sought the expansion of that lair.



GHOST MASTER VARIOUS

As a strategy game that put the player in the role of the enemy, this was a strong homage to the ethos of *Dungeon Keeper*. There were just as many parallels with *The Sims*, too, though you used your resources to scare residents away from their homes rather than make them happy.



OVERLORD VARIOUS

With players assuming the role of an evil Overlord, this humorous game took cues from *Dungeon Keeper*'s ability to let you be the bad guy. It also let you control the game's minion races, bringing a sense of strategy into what was overall a well-received action-adventure game.



WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS, MY LORD!? PSP

With a dungeon that you must develop and the better the dungeon the more creatures you had turn up and the greater the chance you had of stopping invasions, the similarities with *Dungeon Keeper* were obvious.



Minority Report

CLASSIC GAMES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED



PC ENGINE CD

The PC Engine was extremely popular in its homeland of Japan and it received three distinct CD-ROM accessories. Rory Milne takes a look at just a few of the many standout PC Engine CD titles

AKUMAJOU DRACULA X: CHI NO RONDO

■ DEVELOPER: KONAMI ■ YEAR: 1993

■ **THE CD-ROM² INTRODUCED** CD gaming to PC Engine owners in 1988 with the memory-enhanced Super CD-ROM² and Arcade CD-ROM² following in 1991 and 1994 respectively. These add-ons boast an extensive library, which includes quality titles such as Konami's highly regarded *Akumajou Dracula X*.

The 'X' in the title denotes that it's the tenth entry in Konami's popular series – a series known in the West as *Castlevania*. Although elements of the game were repurposed for a less impressive SNES re-imagining, *Akumajou Dracula X* remained a PC Engine CD exclusive.

For those familiar with Konami's long-running franchise, the plot of *Akumajou Dracula X* should come as no surprise – Richter Belmont has stormed Dracula's castle with the aim of defeating the vampire's apostles along with their unholy master. Richter's weapon of choice is a whip, but secondary weapons, which are powered up by collecting hearts, prove essential to his progress.

From its earliest stages onwards, *Akumajou Dracula X* distinguishes itself from many other combative side-scrolling platformers of the time by playing fair. Make no mistake, *Akumajou Dracula X* is challenging, but its challenge is down to the clever AI that manages the defence strategies and attacks of the game's undead enemies. Simply put, there are no



» [PC ENGINE CD] If enough hearts are collected, Richter's secondary weapon can be used in a super attack.



» [PC ENGINE CD] One of the most atmospheric stages in *Akumajou Dracula X* depicts an ornate church setting.



» [PC ENGINE CD] A haunted shipyard stage sees Richter Belmont battle against a ghoulish skeleton crew.



» [PC ENGINE CD] Richter fends off vampire bats while the bridge he's standing on collapses underneath him.

cheap deaths in *Akumajou Dracula X*. The game doesn't need to rely on enemy assaults that give the player no time to react or nowhere to hide. Instead, the CPU opposition are skilful and difficult to predict, which makes them especially tough to dispatch. Of special note are the merciless bosses found at the end of *Akumajou Dracula X*'s eight post-prologue stages. These range from monster movie favourites to Death himself and they deal a lot of damage while delivering their devastating attacks, which, although initially overwhelming, can be avoided after some intensive practice.

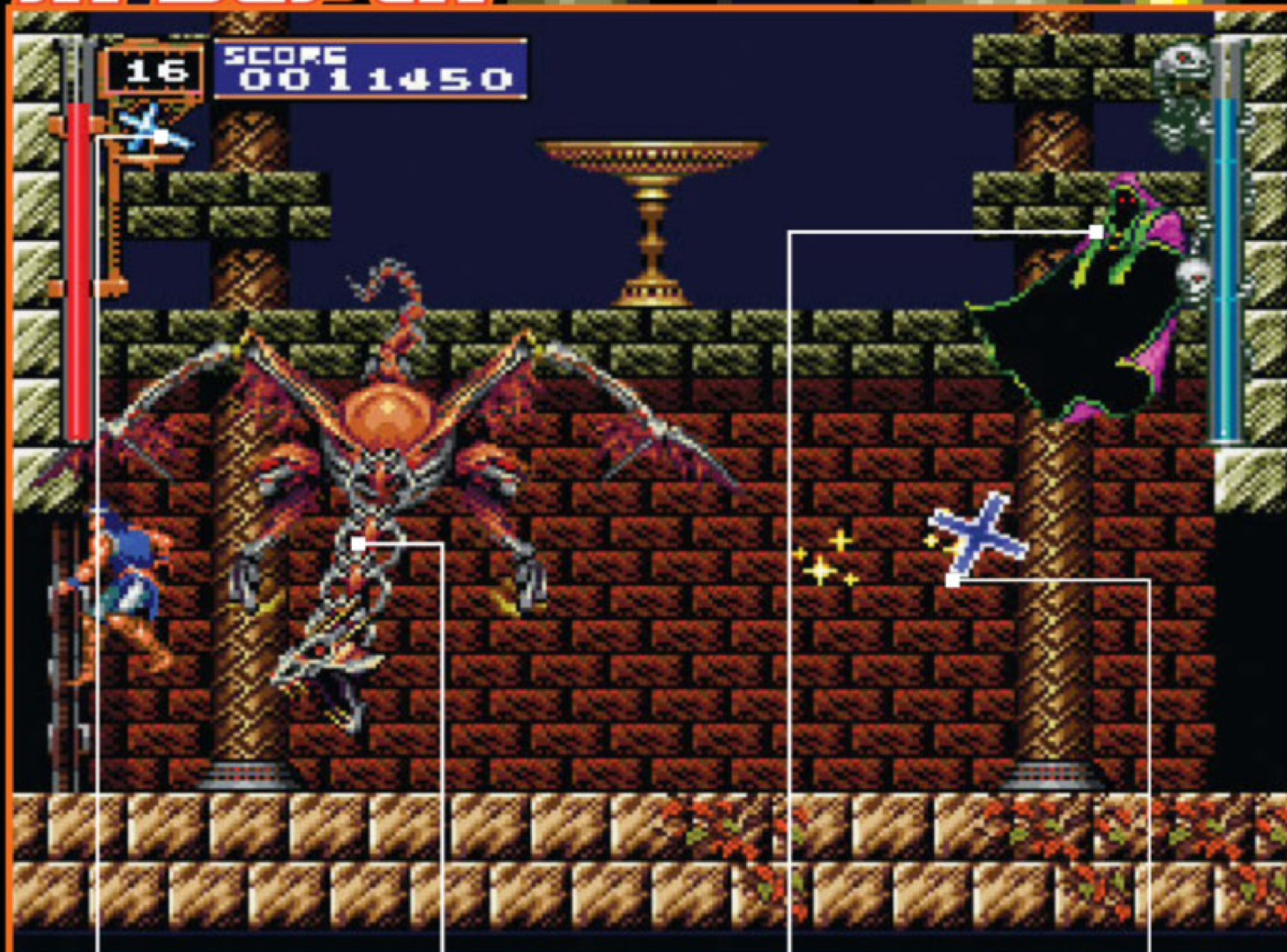
Akumajou Dracula X also excels in its carefully considered stage construction and design. An early stage sees Richter scaling a burning building protected by thuggish skeleton sentries, but when he reaches the top it seems unguarded. Seconds later, screaming skeletons smash through the windows of the building's interior to deliver a genuinely heart-stopping moment. A later level has Richter battling his way through a church decorated with stained glass windows while organ music builds to an ominous crescendo in the background.

Equally worthy of praise are the game's visually impressive set-pieces such as when Richter is chased through a hallway by a half-decomposed bull or when he has to run across a collapsing bridge pursued by vampire bats.

Konami's game is a sum of its individual pieces. But since almost every aspect of the PC Engine CD title is honed to perfection this leaves little to criticise. One thing is certain, *Akumajou Dracula X* is deserving of its reputation as one of the best titles in the *Castlevania* series.

Super CD-ROM² photo courtesy of Bryan Ochalla.

IN DEPTH



ARMED AND DANGEROUS

■ In addition to his whip, Richter can obtain secondary weapons found hidden around the castle. These deliver long-range attacks of varying effectiveness.

INTELLIGENT AI

■ The attack patterns of Dracula's disciples consistently impress. Rather than aiming the same assault at predefined locations, Richter's antagonists target his position with a variety of merciless attacks.

NOT THE BOSS OF ME

■ The bosses in *Akumajou Dracula X* are varied: Medusa, Frankenstein's Monster and Death are just a few. Each boss seems difficult, but practice will see you to victory.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

■ The designers of *Akumajou Dracula X* littered their creation with set-piece moments spanning everything from jump scares to collapsing scenery and imposing bosses.

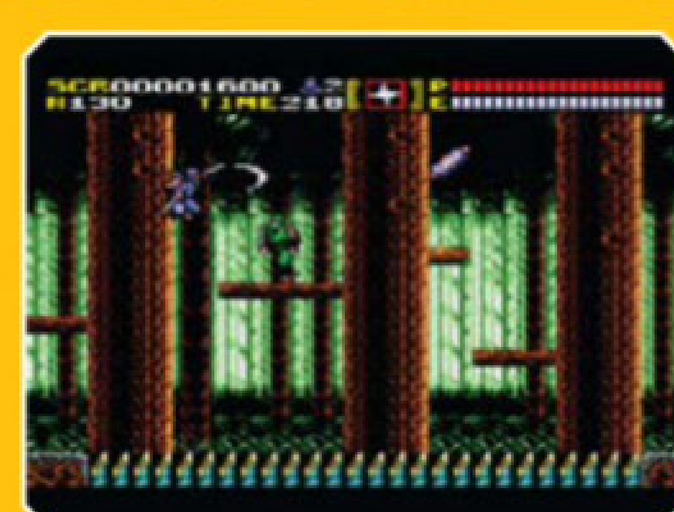
IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...



SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV

SNES

■ A 16-bit classic, *Super Castlevania IV* introduces an eight directional whip to the series, which, as well as a weapon, can be attached to overhead scenery and then used to swing over gaps that are too wide to jump. It also sports some impressive visual effects thanks to the SNES's Mode 7 graphics.



NINJA GAIDEN

MASTER SYSTEM

■ Although poles apart from *Akumajou Dracula X* thematically, and played at a far faster pace, the often overlooked Master System *Ninja Gaiden* shares secondary weapons, intense and high-risk boss fights, a similar structure and ratio of combat to platform gameplay with the PC Engine CD title.



AKUMAJOU DRACULA

SHARP X68000

■ Given both games take inspiration from the Famicom original, it makes sense that the X68000 *Akumajou Dracula* shares a few scenes with its PC Engine CD counterpart. The graphically stunning Sharp outing interprets these very differently, however, while adding numerous fresh stages to the mix.

Minority Report

GALAXY DEKA GAYVAN

■ DEVELOPER: FILL IN CAFÉ ■ YEAR: 1993

■ IN CASE YOU were wondering, 'Deka' means 'Detective' in English and 'Gayvan' is the secret identity of *Galaxy Deka Gayvan*'s lead character, Hiro Aoyama. The game's crazy plot sees Hiro and his sidekick, Michiki, fist fighting an entire city full of aliens.

Fill In Café's colourful side-scrolling brawler features some superb, if cute, pixel art. This cuteness shouldn't suggest easiness, however, as *Galaxy Deka Gayvan* doesn't take any prisoners. The game takes its cues from *Kunio-kun* and *Double Dragon*, but foregoes collectible weapons in favour of additional moves – all worked with just two buttons.

Aside from thematic differences, *Galaxy Deka Gayvan*'s main deviation from the Technos formula is to give its heroes power-suited alter egos – Gayvan and Mittchi. Both protagonists start the game in their civvies with a full energy bar and a second empty bar that fills up as capsules are collected from fallen opponents. When this bar has power, a fighter can don their power suit, dish out more damage, and perform special moves. This bar runs down as the suit is used, though. Since *Galaxy Deka Gayvan*'s enemies don't mess around when it comes to fisticuffs, going into the game's challenging boss fights with a fully powered suit is highly recommended.



» [PC ENGINE CD] The power-suited Mittchi aims a flying kick at a pair of misleadingly cute alien invaders.





» [PC ENGINE CD] A well-timed back flip distracts Gayvan while an alien foe attacks from the rear.



» [PC ENGINE CD] Hiro Aoyama tackles a challenging boss fight without his Gayvan power suit.

MORE GAMES TO PLAY



» FAUSSETÉ AMOUR

■ DEVELOPER: NAXAT SOFT
■ YEAR: 1993

■ Expensive games that fall short of greatness are often harshly criticised, but *Fausseté Amour* is worth playing despite its flaws. The protagonist in Naxat's platformer attacks with a sword on an extending chain *Castlevania*-style, which can be anchored to platforms similar to *Bionic Commando*. Although the game's power-ups make boss fights one-sided, *Fausseté Amour*'s gameplay combines disparate mechanics.



» SAPPHIRE

■ DEVELOPER: CAPRODUCTION
■ YEAR: 1995

■ This game achieves great things technically for a PC Engine CD game. This highly impressive vertical shooter boasts pre-rendered opponents sourced from textured polygon models that wouldn't look out of place on far more advanced hardware. The title's gameplay doesn't disappoint, either, mainly thanks to a colour-coded upgrade system that boosts different weapons on different characters' ships.



» FLASH HIDERS

■ DEVELOPER: RIGHT STUFF
■ YEAR: 1993

■ Right Stuff deserves credit for creating an RPG/fighter hybrid, but the game's brawling doesn't really benefit from having RPG elements. There are attack, defence and speed bars which can be levelled-up with points gained from quick, skilful wins. But the devastating damage done by special moves leaves power-ups redundant. Negatives aside, *Flash Hiders* has responsive controls and extensive movesets.



» L-DIS

■ DEVELOPER: MASAYA
■ YEAR: 1991

■ As cute as a button but as hard as nails, Masaya's forced-scrolling cute-'em-up is a celebration of pixel art featuring beautiful boss sprites. Not that you have time to admire the graphics, as even slight lapses in concentration result in losing lives and weaponry. Your weapon set must be mastered to ensure progress and it is chosen pre-game. Visually eclectic power-ups appear throughout the confined, boss-heavy proceedings.

MOTTEKE TAMAGO

■ DEVELOPER: NAXAT ■ YEAR: 1997



» [PC ENGINE CD] As well as raising chicks, these hens shake lose power-ups from bushes.

■ **FOR REASONS UNKNOWN, *Motteke Tamago* wasn't released in 1993 when the game was developed.** Instead, Naxat's game surfaced on a 1997 issue of *Super PC Engine Fan Deluxe*.

It's hard to believe that this happened due to commercial concerns, however – firstly because the game's single and multi-player egg collecting and chick herding objectives are lots of fun, but secondly because the developer took its title's core gameplay and adapted it for a 1998 Saturn release. Not that *Motteke Tamago*'s core gameplay is lacking in any way; trying to out-compete three other chickens in a race to collect eggs, keeping those eggs safe from opponents until they hatch and guiding your chicks back to your hen house provides an absorbing challenge.

The real fun starts, though, when the feathered combatants shake loose power-ups from bushes growing around the ten stages of *Motteke Tamago*'s rural and urban worlds. These display icons giving a clue to their effects, which range from blistering speed to freezing competitors to the spot. Since these are game-changers, and easily collected by accident, the best approach is to get used to them in multi-player mode before tackling the unforgiving solo challenge.



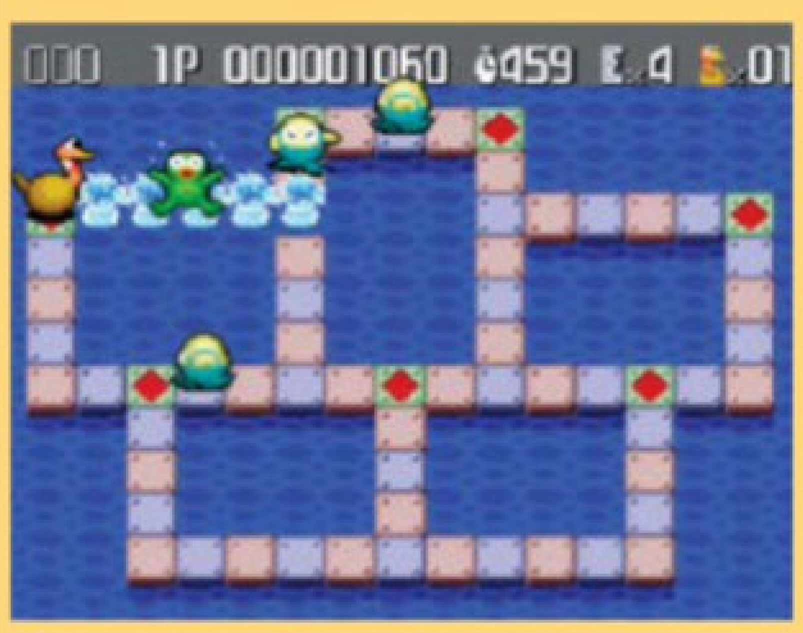
» [PC ENGINE CD] A giant chick clogs up the playfield by laying square eggs everywhere!

RETRO STINKER

»BLACK HOLE ASSAULT

■ DEVELOPER: MICRONET ■ YEAR: 1992

■ **While not** as disappointing as *Rise Of The Robots*, *Black Hole Assault* is still uninspiring stuff. The game's graphics aren't bad, but a limited move-set and unimpressive AI make this one to avoid.



» SPLASH LAKE

■ DEVELOPER: NEC AVENUE
■ YEAR: 1991

■ **A puzzler based** around soaking animals, *Splash Lake* boasts colourful sprites and jolly background music. Its ostrich protagonist's objective is to hop around a tiled playfield pecking fragile tiles to sink them and the animals walking on them. Naturally, the ostrich has to avoid sinking itself. Stages are cleared when every creature has been sunk with progress being rewarded by less easily navigated tile formations.



» CD DENJIN

■ DEVELOPER: RED
■ YEAR: 1993

■ **In this game** you play as the descendant of Red's platforming caveman, Genjin – Bonk to western gamers. *CD Denjin* is a side-scrolling shooter and sequel to the technically superior *PC Denjin*. Technical comparisons aside, *CD Denjin* delivers amusing gameplay. Genjin can rescue friends from strange entities like a sun-glassed helicopter or a note-firing Elvis. Bizarre bosses bookend *CD Denjin*'s frantic gunplay.



» THE TV SHOW

■ DEVELOPER: RIGHT STUFF
■ YEAR: 1995

■ **Right Stuff's puzzler** has you clearing stages with bombs, but *The TV Show* offers its own unique challenge. There are seven selectable characters each with their own unique ability like speed, agility or a special attack. Each level features roaming opponents and protected diamonds, which you can collect after blowing up their guardians. The holes in the game's tiled backdrops provide an additional hazard for you to deal with.



» NEXZR

■ DEVELOPER: KANEKO
■ YEAR: 1992

■ **Paradoxically, this game** is and isn't a shooter for purists. To explain, Kaneko's creation loads all the shooting onto one button and doesn't feature levelling-up of the game's various weaponry. So *Nexzr* is more like how shoot-'em-ups used to be than how they are now. Regardless of purity, *Nexzr* isn't for the squeamish, as its foes attack at speed making considered weapon choices and careful manoeuvring essential.

RETROREVIVAL

Stryker's Run

FAR FROM A SIMPLE JOG IN THE PARK

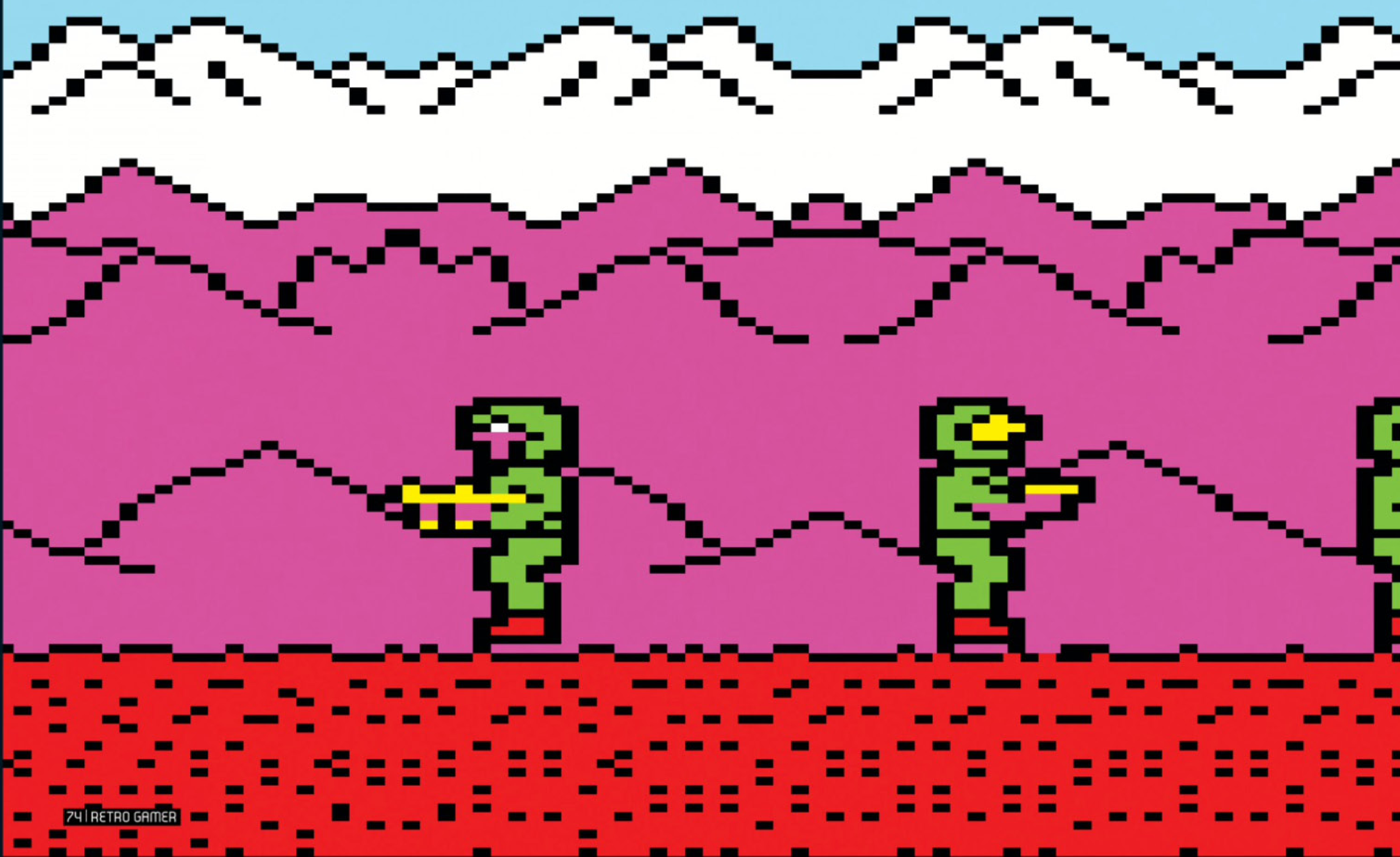


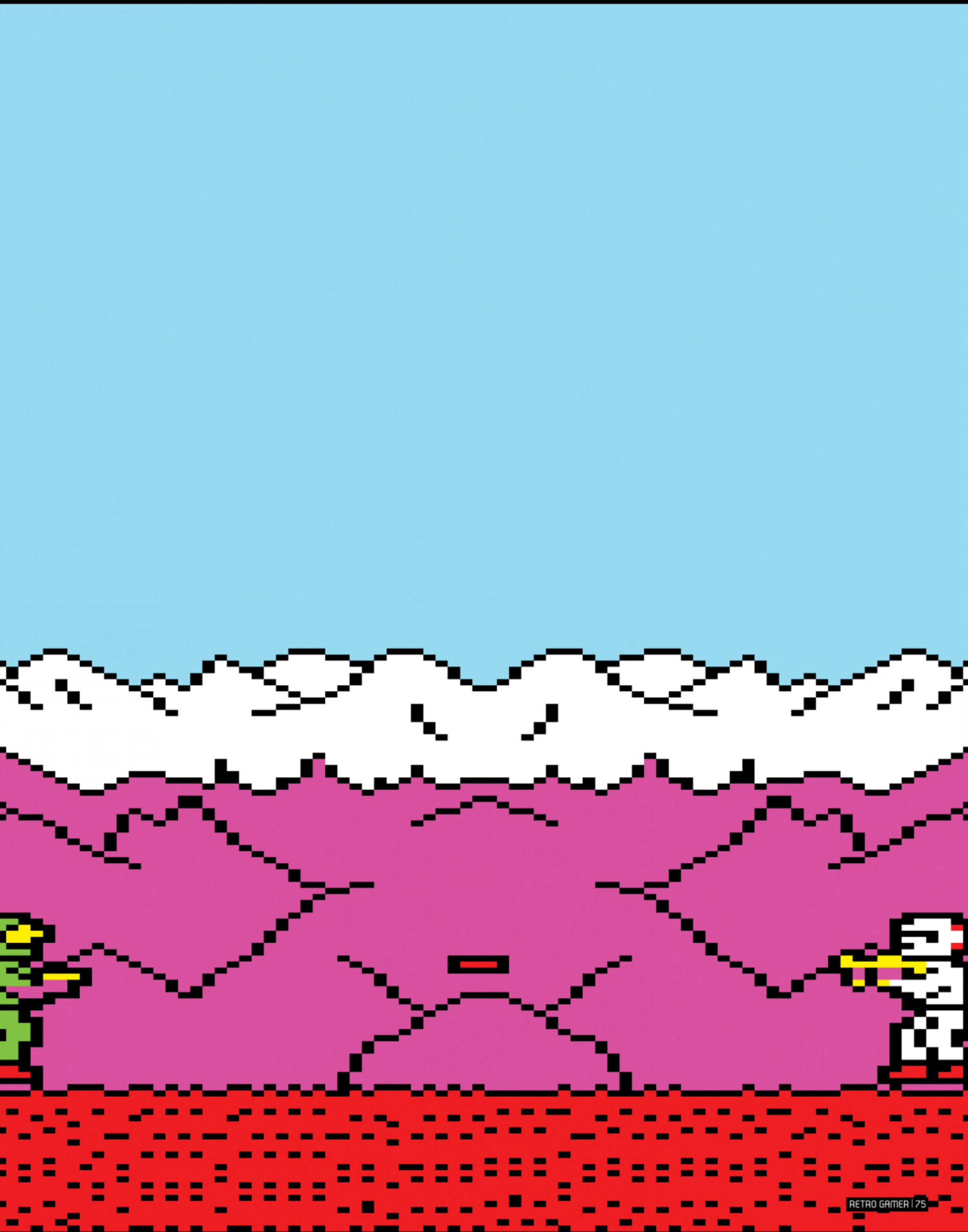
» BBC MICRO » CHRIS ROBERTS / PHILIP MELLER » 1986

One of the things that I love about retro machines is that they each have very distinctive graphical styles. While games I can play on my PlayStation 4 are scarcely distinguishable from their Xbox One counterparts, it's hard to mistake a C64 game for a Spectrum game and vice versa – and it's hard to mistake *Stryker's Run* for anything other than a BBC Micro game. The chunky, colourful visuals are quite unlike anything on the BBC's 8-bit peers, and look absolutely excellent. A little bit of flicker here and there is ultimately a small price to pay for such vibrant backgrounds.

Stryker's Run is no shallow beauty, either. The run-and-gun action is nice and responsive, and there's a good array of obstacles to overcome. Enemies won't let you get away with constantly crouching, mines force you to watch where you're going and helicopters are an ever-present threat. Thankfully, you're not fighting alone as allied soldiers and helicopters are also roaming the game's landscape and will take out enemies on your behalf – and when you need even more help than your comrades can provide, it's possible to commandeer a helicopter of your own.

While the BBC Micro had a reputation for being an educational machine, games such as *Stryker's Run* prove that it was perfectly capable of arcade-style action when given the opportunity to deliver it. Better yet, it's a BBC original and one that can't be mistaken for anything else out there. If this isn't already in your collection, it's well worth tracking down. ★





MAX PAYNE

To uncover a tale of development spanning two continents, James Churchill shoots the breeze with Peter Hajba and Scott Miller about bullet time, hitscanning and 3D animating via camcorder footage

As a camera tracks up an industrial skyscraper in a New York blizzard, Max Payne utters his first words of the game: "They were all dead. The final gunshot was an exclamation mark to everything that had led to this point. I released my finger from the trigger. And then it was over." This brilliantly set the stage for one of the most atmospheric and celebrated shooters ever made. A game that popularised bullet time within the action genre, and contained inspirations spanning film noir, Norse mythology, graphic novels and Hong Kong action movies, whilst interweaving the tale of Max's revenge for the murder of his family. In 2001, action games didn't come more badass than this.

But to make any sense of the trail leading up to the high-octane blockbuster hit, we need to go back to 1996, when *Max Payne* developers Remedy Entertainment had just released its first game for MS-DOS: *Death Rally*, a vehicular combat title that received mostly positive reviews. But for future efforts the company wished to expand. "Samuli Syvähuoko, the CEO of Remedy, called me and asked if I'd like to join them to work on a new game." says Peter Hajba, who was responsible for roles including animation, particle effects and texture art. "I was studying animation in a college in Dublin and was going to study for three years, but I accepted the offer and moved to Espoo." Like any young developer, the Finnish studio had humble beginnings. "Remedy was established in the basement of the house of one of our founders," Peter explains. "From there we proceeded to rent an office space. The atmosphere gradually slid from garage band to professional developer."

For its next venture Remedy wished to continue its working partnership with American-based publisher Apogee Software, which had transitioned to releasing all future games under the name 3D Realms. Apogee founder Scott Miller recalls Remedy's ambitious plans. "The creative minds at Remedy put together three project ideas that they wanted to present to me, to see



» [PC] The face model for Max was the game's writer, Sam Lake.



> "The atmosphere [at Remedy] gradually slid from garage band to professional developer"
> Peter Hajba



IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** Rockstar Games, Apogee Software
» **DEVELOPER:** Remedy Entertainment
» **RELEASED:** 2001
» **PLATFORM:** PC
» **GENRE:** Third-person shooter

if any of them looked promising as a full-blown game. One of them was a 3D racing game, one was a space battle RTS game that would have been a little like *Homeworld* had it ever come out, and the final idea was a top-down isometric shooter in the style of *Loaded*, which they were calling *Dark Justice*. Surprisingly to me, they had it in mind to make all three games at the same time!"

Scott's input as a veteran developer and publisher encouraged Remedy to solely develop the *Dark Justice* project. "I still remember the meeting I had with a group of the top Remedy execs who came to Dallas from Finland," he recalls. "I was selling them on the idea of building a strong character-driven franchise with a compelling story, unique character traits, and naming the game based on the lead character like we had done with *Duke Nukem*. At that first meeting I even said: 'Guys, if we're successful, there will be a film based on this character and his story.' And sure enough, that ended up happening."

But to achieve the success Scott outlined, a catchy marketable name was needed. "I finally came up with



» [PC] The graphic novel sequences were made from retouching choreographed photoshoots.

MAXED OUT

All the best moments from Remedy's dark and stylish shooter



THE PAYNE BEGINS

■ The first segment of the game sees Max arriving home only to witness the murder of his wife and daughter. It was originally intended to be a graphic novel cutscene, but making it playable pulls us into Max's bleak world view and helps us understand his determined course of revenge.



A TENDER MOMENT

■ An early chapter sees Max blast through a hotel filled with dingy sex rooms, only to find pimp gangster Rico Meurte and prostitute Candy Dawn in a moment of oral passion. They don't take kindly to Max's surprise intrusion, but the pair end up being all mouth and no trousers.



RAGNA ROCK

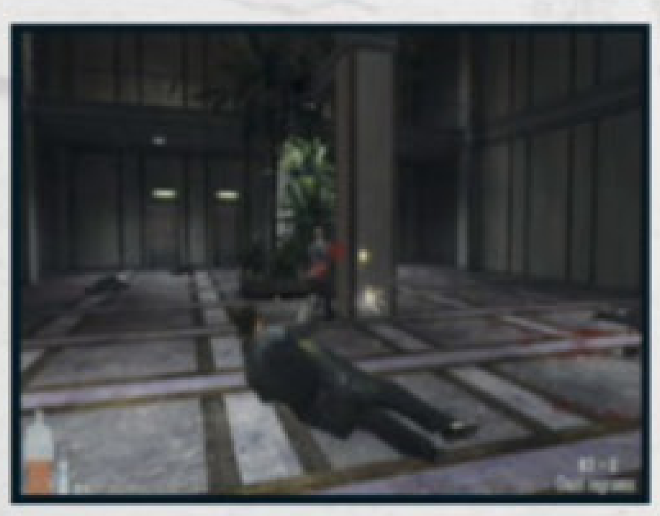
■ This Nordic-themed nightclub is one of the moodiest and unsettling environments in the game, having become a centre of sacrifice and occult worship. It builds to a chaotic gunfight against Jack Lupino, a man so insane he believes he can communicate with demons.

> "I was looking over this list of about 30 or 40 names and BOOM there was 'Payne' it was a 'holy shit' moment"
> Scott Miller



THE NIGHTMARE SEQUENCES

■ These are the most haunting sections of the game by far, featuring horrific visions of Max's old family home, where abnormally long corridors give way to dark voids lined with blood trails, all accompanied by the cries of Max's dead wife and daughter.



AESIR CORP

■ The final assault on this dark corporation constitutes a challenging, yet epic, series of showdowns featuring laser filled hallways, helicopter assaults and explosions aplenty. The beginning of the level also contains a gunfight in a lobby strikingly similar to a certain sci-fi bullet time action romp.



I KNOW KUNG FU

■ Like many PC games of the day, *Max Payne* had a large modding scene. One of the most fun was the 'Kung Fu' mod, giving Max access to martial arts techniques that only became cooler when combined with bullet time. It can still be downloaded for modern digital platforms.



» [PC] Sometimes the enemies looked laughable with their aburd expressions.

Max," Scott explains. "We had the last name, 'Heat', and although we all knew it wasn't perfect, we went and got a trademark on 'Max Heat' mostly as a backup plan." Scott estimates this process cost $15,000, but 3D Realms and Remedy still sought perfection. "It finally arrived in an email from Remedy a month or so later. They had asked their internal team to submit the best last names they could think of, and I was looking over this list of about 30 to 40 names, and BOOM, there was Payne. It was a 'holy shit!' moment because I knew it was perfect."

With a new focus, the format of the game changed rapidly. "We abandoned the top-down perspective and switched to third-person," recalls Peter. "Also, the character and story started to get much better fleshed out once Sam Lake joined our ranks." One of the many narrative devices brought in by writer Sam Lake was the inclusion of graphic novel-style cutscenes. And although he focused the narrative into a powerful and troubled tale of vengeance, democracy was still present during story development. "Everyone contributed ideas," Peter explains. "All the characters and stories evolved in a rather organic manner; some details were added, considered, then dropped, while other aspects stuck and grew. In some earlier versions of the story, the Valkyr drug mutated people into monstrosities. But that was abandoned."

Whilst a memorable name and well-told narrative were crucial for success, the gameplay was equally, if not more, so. *Max Payne* is widely remembered for one trademark mechanic: bullet time. Although it was not the first game to feature slow motion during gun combat, it moulded it into a smooth system which could be easily controlled by the player. "This was one of my key contributions to the game," Scott proudly states. "I was visiting Remedy and they were showing me a very cool feature they'd added: slow motion enemy deaths. I was immediately struck with the idea that we needed to not just have this slow motion technology be cool eye candy, but that we needed to make it part of actual gameplay. My insistence on this idea got the Remedy team thinking about how to do it, and I suggested having a button the player could press that would shift the game into slow motion mode, with the exception that Max could still aim in real time." But as Scott reveals, this was the main reason that multiplayer was left out. "The best we could come up with was that the bullet time effect was localised to within 40 feet of the player, so players outside this bubble remained in normal time. But it's hard to make part of the game appear to go slow, while another part still goes at normal speed."

However, the experience didn't suffer, with bullet



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

DEATH RALLY
SYSTEM: PC
YEAR: 1996

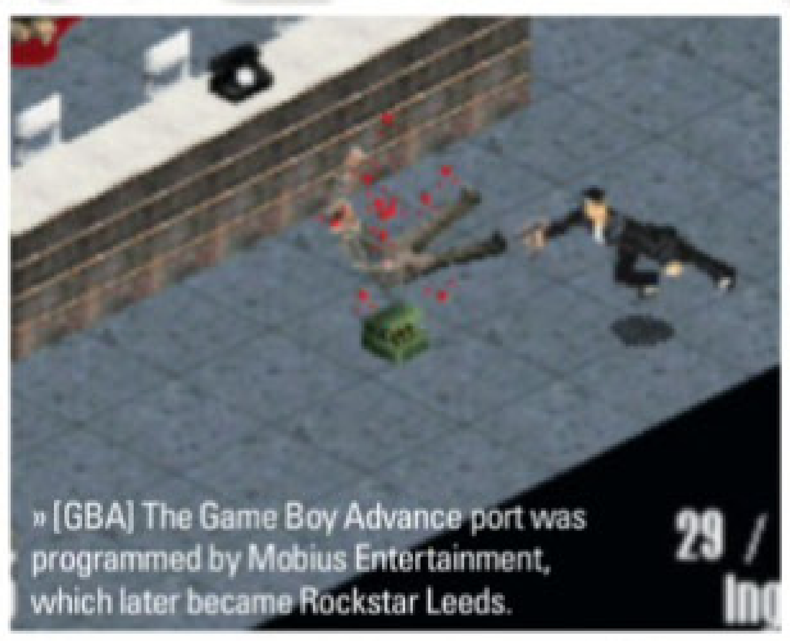
ALAN WAKE (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: XBOX 360, PC
YEAR: 2010

AGENTS OF STORM
SYSTEM: IOS
YEAR: 2014

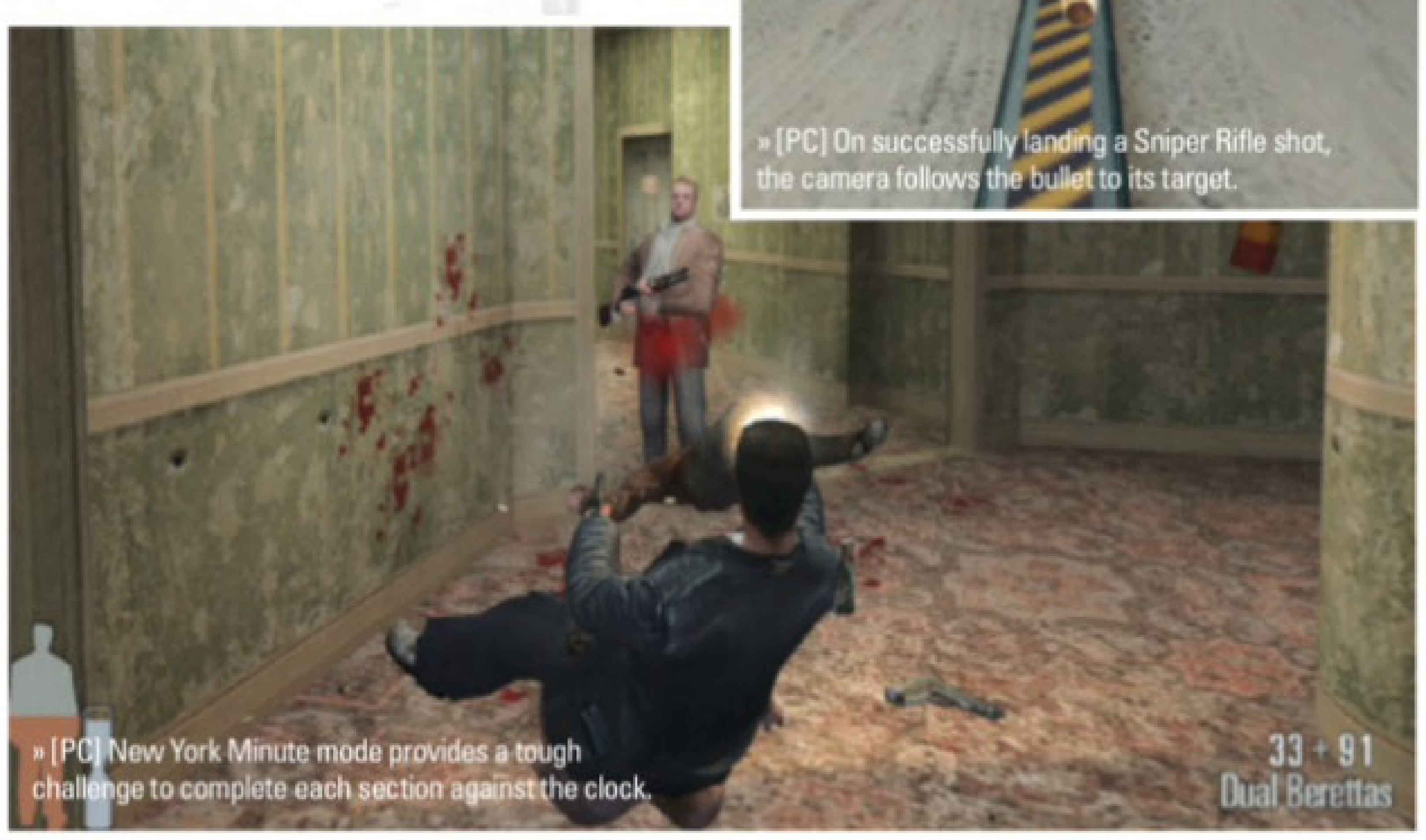


» [PC] Peter named Eadweard Muybridge's book, *The Human Figure In Motion*, as an animating influence.

time being coincidentally enhanced by an earlier design decision: the rejection of the traditional hitscanning method seen in shooting games. "Hitscan is a technique that, in the most simple terms, means that when a gun is fired, an immediate invisible straight line is drawn from the gun to the first object it hits, whether an enemy, object, or wall," Scott explains. "In effect, the bullet moves instantaneously through the environment, while real bullets travel between 700 to 1200 miles an hour. So, as a way to make *Max Payne* a more realistic game, an early idea I pitched to Remedy was to not use the hitscan method, but to model the bullets travelling at a more realistic speed through the environment."

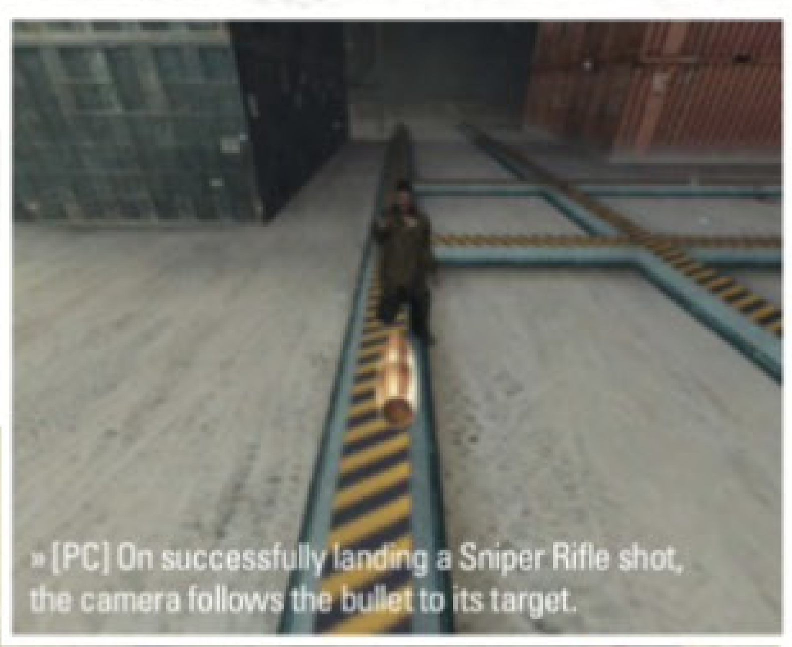


» [GBA] The Game Boy Advance port was programmed by Mobius Entertainment, which later became Rockstar Leeds.



» [PC] New York Minute mode provides a tough challenge to complete each section against the clock.

Remedy took the bullet time mechanic even further by adding cinematic and stylish dives that the player could execute. "Initially, Max's shoot/dodge dive could be done in one direction only," explains Peter. "Once you chose which way to dive, you couldn't change your aim much, as rotating the whole character sideways would have looked very odd. But then our texture artist, Teemu Heinilehto, wrote a 'wouldn't it be cool if…' email to everyone, proposing that the player should be able to aim in any direction after executing a dive, and surely this could be done by blending the animations. So we spent quite a bit of time and effort on this mechanic, and the result was a blend of eight dive animations. Dive in one direction and turn any way you want. We couldn't quite cover aiming up and down in a dive, but still, doing 360 degree turning was already quite an improvement!"



» [PC] On successfully landing a Sniper Rifle shot, the camera follows the bullet to its target.

Due to limited resources, Peter and the rest of the team had to get creative to make the game happen. "The character animations were sort of rotoscoped. We recorded some video footage with a DV camcorder in a gym, with our friend performing some dives for us, plus the usual running cycles and some death bodyfalls. I then took that video tape, and used an abandoned video editing deck VCR to look through the motions frame by frame on a TV screen, and animating the characters by hand accordingly. First the key poses, then refining the details. You see, back then motion capture was rare, noisy and super expensive." But it wasn't the only source of inspiration for Peter. "I realised I didn't have to rely on our own footage, I could also watch some Hong Kong action movies and see how the stuntmen performed their deaths, so I manually animated some death animations based on those."



» [PC] Max's death will result in a circling camera as he holds a painful grimace.

And it wasn't only character movement which was sourced from outside influences. To accurately capture the look of New York City, Remedy staff members travelled to the famous metropolis, using photographs to create textures for the in-game environments. "There were many trends in the game industry at the time, and 'use photos for more realistic results' was one of them," states Peter. "It was simpler back then because we had no normal maps or bump maps; you didn't have to account for false lighting cues. The lighting and shading was baked into the colour/diffuse maps. Done. To get perfect results you'd have to abide to very strict rules in lighting when taking the photos, but back then the game industry was still quite homebrew, garage tech, hire-your-friends kind of pioneering."

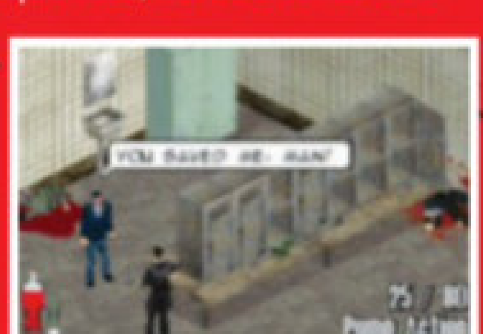
With the lack of motion capture accompanied by a modest budget, the team had to pool every resource possible to create character models. As Peter reveals, "because we decided to use photo textures, we needed faces to photograph. The Remedy staff were the closest people we could find. The people in the neighbouring companies in the same office complex and friends of the development team were the second closest. I somehow avoided having my face in *Max Payne*, but my father ended up in the game as one of B.B.'s mobs in the parking garage scene."

Even though there were many jobs to juggle, Peter looks back fondly on the experience. "I appreciated the diversity of tasks – every day was different, and if one task was blocked, I could switch into something different." In the end, everyone's hard graft paid off. The combination of action gameplay, slick cinematics and a narrative fuelled by rebellious desperation proved to be a winner, with *Max Payne* selling over 4 million copies. It's handling of bullet time and gunplay hugely influenced the action genre, with echoes of its design still being seen today. "We all had high hopes," recalls Peter. "But it was still a surprise to have it succeed so well. Also, it meant we could keep our jobs!" *

PAYNEFUL SEQUELS More madness from Max

MAX PAYNE (GBA) 2003

■ This handheld port of *Max Payne* was surprisingly good considering the limitations of the Game Boy Advance's hardware. Placing the action in an isometric viewpoint, this version kept most of the comic book cutscenes with their voice overs, but removed the nightmare sequences, 3D cutscenes and most of the soundtrack. However, it could definitely satisfy any fan curiosity.



MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE 2003

■ The sequel continued Max's troubled tale in the form of a noir love story, complete with a deeper bullet time system and improved visuals. However, it turned out to be a little on the short side and the narrative slightly lacked the desperate tone of the first game. However, it's still a great title worthy of anyone's time.



MAX PAYNE 3 2012

■ Rockstar Games developed the third *Max Payne* offering. Although not a bad game by any stretch, it's a far cry from the cold harsh environments of New York City, instead focusing on a broken down Max under the sunny skies of Sao Paulo. It was the first game in the series to feature online multiplayer.



MAX PAYNE (FILM) 2008

■ Cinematic treatments of videogames have never been kind, usually stooping to the lowest common denominator with a total lack of disregard for the original source material. *Max Payne* is among the worst of these, with horrible dialogue, pacing, and acting in the form of boredom-peddler Mark Wahlberg as Max. And for some reason it also features demonic winged creatures.



Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come



» **Featured System:** Xbox 360
» **Year:** 2010
» **Publisher:** Activision
» **Developer:** Bizarre Creations
» **Key People:** Gareth Wilson, Ged Talbot (lead designers), Chris Davie (art director)

GO DEEPER

» ***Blur*'s TV advertising unwisely took swipes at cutesy racers like *Mario Kart*, challenging players to "race like a big boy."**

» **The soundtrack to *Blur* featured licensed music from The Crystal Method, Jacknife Lee and the Ninja Tune record label.**



»[Xbox 360] *Blur* is a technical showcase, overloading the screen with special effects when the weaponry comes into play.

50. BLUR

It sold poorly and resulted in the closure of its developer, but that isn't the fate that Blur deserved. Nick Thorpe revisits a favourite game of his and explains why you should give this excellent racer a second look…

THE BACKGROUND

In 2007, Bizarre Creations was one of the world's most coveted developers of racing games – and with a back catalogue that included *Formula 1 97*, *Metropolis Street Racer* and the *Project Gotham Racing* series, it's not hard to see why. At the same time, publisher Activision had been steadily growing for many years and was becoming particularly well-known for acquiring studios. Flush with cash thanks to its recent successes with the *Guitar Hero* and *Call Of Duty* franchises, the publisher was able to part with the considerable sum of $107.4 million in order to acquire the Liverpool-based studio with the goal of creating a brand new racing franchise. When it was announced in 2009, *Blur* was a strange hybrid of approaches. The game was to feature the real-world cars and locations that were the staple of the *Project Gotham Racing* series, but with a combative twist – players could utilise weaponry, a feature more in keeping with more imaginitive racers such as *WipEout*, *Mario Kart* and even *Lego Racers*.

As the game's 2010 release approached, it became clear that *Blur* would have a strong focus on multiplayer gaming. As well as integrating social networking features, the game's online functions incorporated the loadouts and perks that had proven popular in the *Call Of Duty* series. Bizarre Creations had hoped that these features would differentiate the game from rival arcade racers such as *Split/Second: Velocity*, which were launching at the same time.

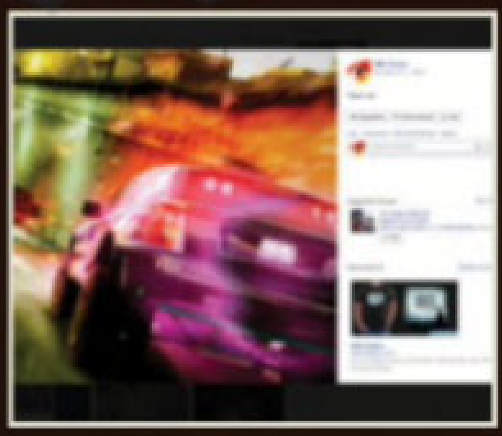
THE GAME

Often positioned as '*Mario Kart* for adults', we'd also describe *Blur* as '*Burnout* with projectiles' as it further develops upon many of the core strengths of both classic series while remaining true to Bizarre Creations' past output. Real-world cars and locations are used as in the *Project Gotham Racing* series, but there's a less realistic style of gameplay here. *Blur* has a classic arcade handling model – it offers depth without sacrificing accessibility, and is grounded enough that you'll feel like you're steering actual cars but still exaggerated to enable some truly stunning cornering. It also has a finely tuned combat system which offers players three slots to carry weapons, including quick but weak Bolts, powerful

Things of note

THE SOCIAL NETWORK

Blur was one of the first console games to integrate social networking functionality alongside standard online gaming services.



SNAP HAPPY

Show-offs can indulge themselves with *Blur*'s photo mode, which lets players to capture their greatest hits and misses then upload them to social networks.



TIGHT PACK

Races feature dense fields of anywhere between ten and 20 participants, meaning that you'll rarely be short of opportunities to use the weaponry you pick up.



ALL TERRAIN ACTION

Vehicles such as the Bowler Nemesis, and Hummer H2 enjoy advantages over the competition in *Blur*'s brilliant off-road races.



TOURIST TROPHY

Although *Blur*'s tracks aren't based on real road layouts like *PGR*, the game still features actual cities such as Los Angeles, Tokyo, Barcelona and Brighton.





»[Xbox 360] Players can earn extra fans by performing tasks like driving between gates during a race.

Shunts and hazardous Mines. Most weapons offer both offensive and defensive options, and vehicles are noticeably affected by damage from them. The offensive weaponry, packed fields, and winding tracks make for chaotic races with constant action.

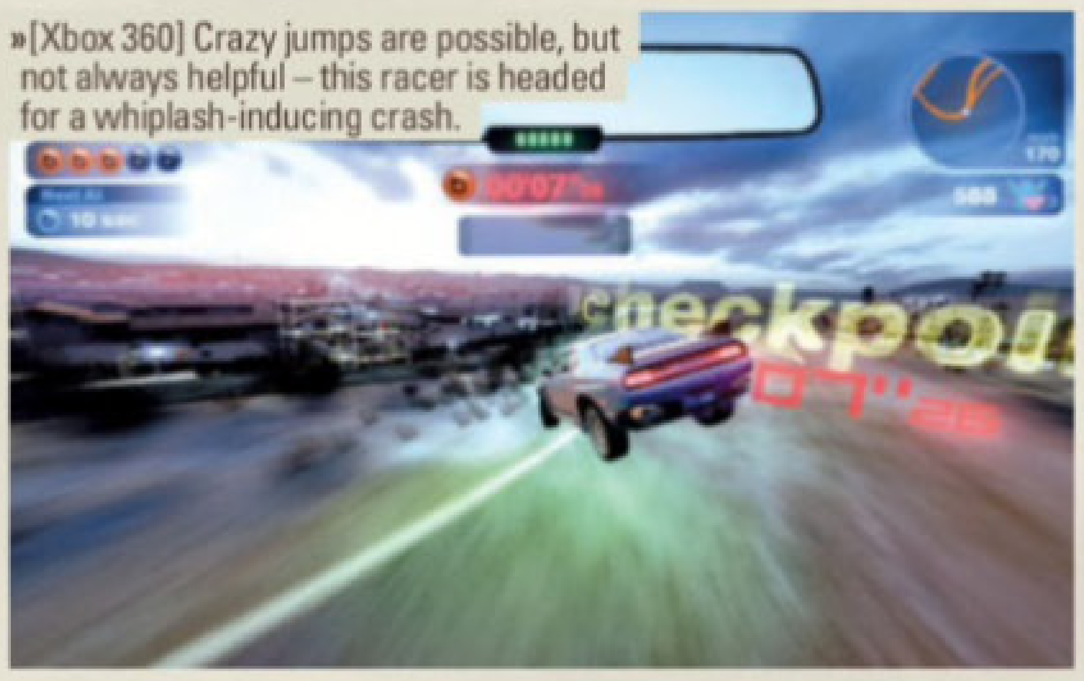
In the Campaign mode players work their way towards showdowns with nine boss characters. This is done by gaining lights, which are awarded for completing races, and fans which are gained by achieving secondary objectives. To add some variety between the regular races, players also get to beat the clock in Checkpoint races and shoot down drone vehicles in Destruction races. After each boss is beaten, you'll gain a car mod that provides benefits such as additional shielding or more Bolt ammo. While you'll rarely be bored due to the intensity of the races and the ferociousness of the AI, single-player is a fairly straightforward affair.

However, if you only play *Blur* in single-player mode you'll miss the game at its best, as multiplayer is the real heart of the game. Unlike most racers which incorporate weaponry, *Blur*'s weapon system isn't designed to keep races close – it's meant to be just as skill-intensive as the racing. This means you won't find any autopilot catch-up items or anything like *Mario Kart*'s much-dreaded Blue Shell, and every weapon can be blocked or evaded. The game also adds an extra layer of strategy by making the non-randomised weapon icons visible on track, enabling players to choose what they're picking up, and with three weapon slots players can elect to store defensive items for when they're needed.

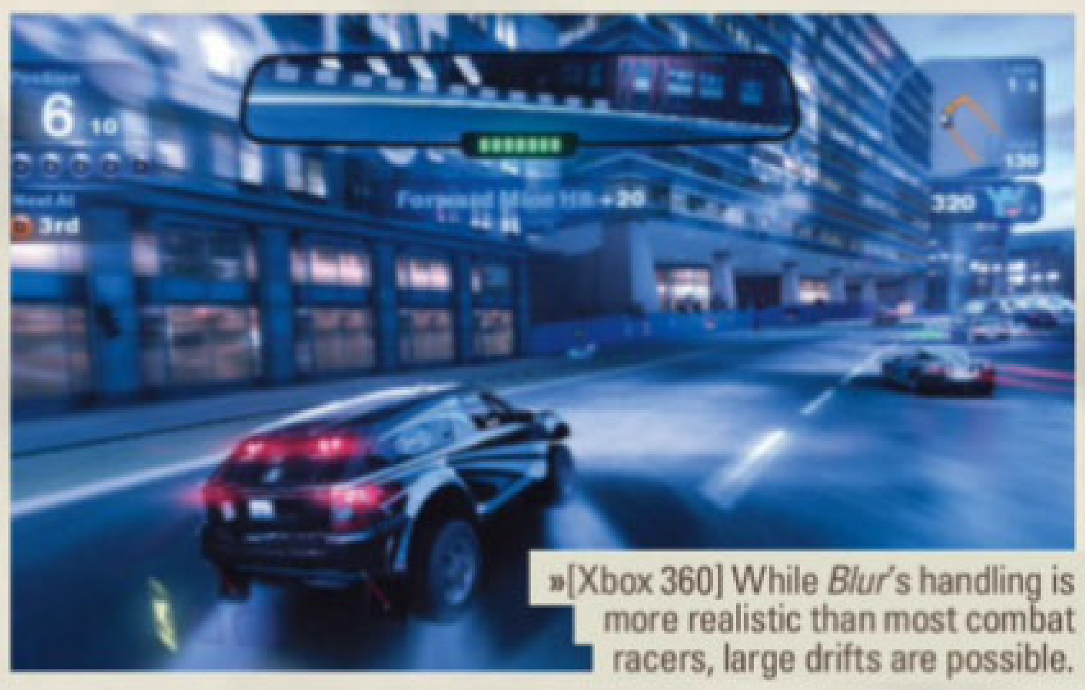
The result is a truly competitive racing game, which goes beyond the standard racing template and scratches a more aggressive itch. When skilled players face off against one another in *Blur*, you can expect to see some incredibly tense races in which the only thing more impressive than the speed on display is the frequency with which attacks are made and thwarted. Victory doesn't come easily, but you'll certainly relish it when it does as you'll have fought bloody hard to earn it.



»[Xbox 360] A thumping bass note erupts from your speakers as a powerful Barge attack is unleashed.



»[Xbox 360] Crazy jumps are possible, but not always helpful – this racer is headed for a whiplash-inducing crash.



»[Xbox 360] While *Blur*'s handling is more realistic than most combat racers, large drifts are possible.



»[Xbox 360] Destruction events task players with shooting down a variety of CPU-controlled vehicles to score points.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

Ultimately, *Blur* failed to meet Activision's sales expectations and within a year of release, Bizarre Creations was closed by the publisher – but that shouldn't put you off, because *Blur* ranks as one of the finest multiplayer racing games ever made.

Even when every online server is closed and Facebook is slowly becoming the kind of punchline that Myspace is today, *Blur*'s strong range of local multiplayer options ensures that you will be able to enjoy it at its best for years to come. Friends can still huddle around a TV for some classic four-way split screen action, or if you're feeling fancy you can get up to 20 players competing together on a local network, now that'd be a feat.

It's a good job too, because no game does combat racing as well as *Blur*. It has a level of strategy that is missing from *Burnout*'s simple slam-and-shunt combat, and the respect for skill that is missing from *Mario Kart*'s party-friendly weapon system. There are no fluke wins or losses here – if you reckon yourself a racing champion, then *Blur* is the game for you. ★

BLACK ISLE studios

Black Isle is fondly remembered as a master of the RPG market, but how did the studio form and what made it such a success? Adam Barnes relives the rise and sudden end of the beloved developer



» [PC] Part of what made *Baldur's Gate* so compelling was the various characters you would meet on your journey.

Names are exceptionally important. In fact, the games industry practically revolves around names, and always has – whether it was the bedroom coders of the Eighties finding popularity through self-branded box art, the prestige that goes along with a reputable development team or the significance that comes with the title of a franchise. From *Final Fantasy* to *Frogger*, *Metal Gear* to *Might & Magic*, names can evoke a much keener interest in gamers than they might've done otherwise, and whatever genre you might favour there's bound to be a name out there that always manages to draw you in on the basis of its name alone. This same truth carries over into development studios, with certain companies marking their territory around particular genres – for example, the way Firaxis regularly proves its worth in the strategy game market. Names are what hold our industry together, and help studious gamers easily pick out the wheat from the chaff simply by reading between the lines of the names associated with a game. It's not a particularly new idea at all, and to PC gamers of the Nineties and RPG fans the name Black Isle will likely bring to mind some of their most treasured games of the period.

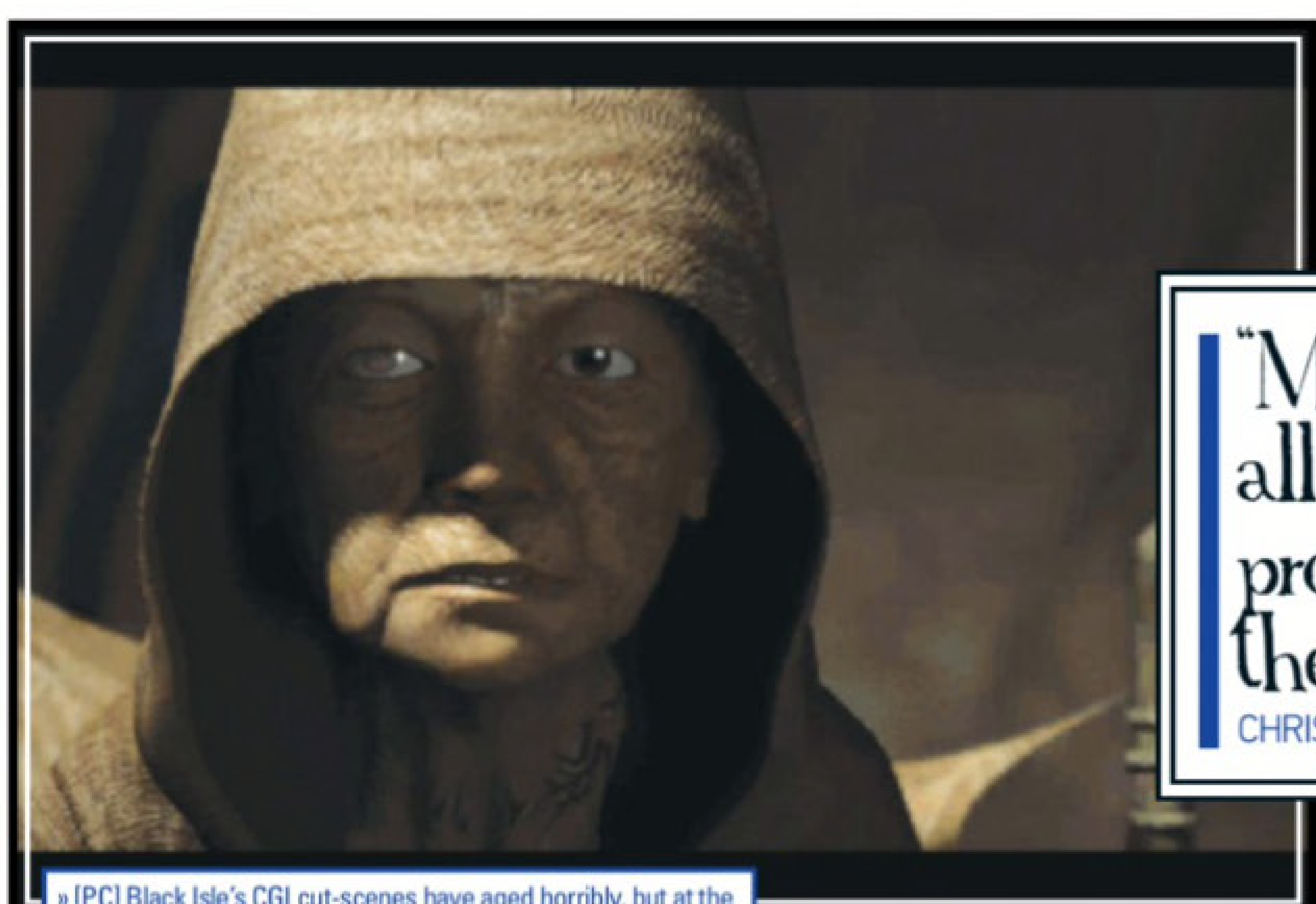
In truth, Black Isle's history is a short one, a pamphlet wedged in the history tome of the decades of gaming already passed and yet it's still a name that holds a great deal of respect. It all began in the mid-Nineties, when PC gaming was in its heyday and PC focused developer-cum-publisher Interplay was finding a great deal of success.

Expansions were being made, staff were being hired and more projects were being taken on, and while that would ultimately spell the doom for the company, it would first give rise to some of the most well-loved RPGs that side of the millennium. There was so much going on at Interplay, however, that something needed to be done. "Brian Fargo [founder and CEO on Interplay] did a smart thing, and did the math," says Chris Avellone, currently a game designer at Obsidian but back then, he was a newbie developer at Interplay. "If your company is turning out 40 titles," he adds, "making one person oversee all of them directly probably isn't going to help the pipeline in the slightest. So the company was broken into separate divisions based on their respective genres, headed by specific directors. These divisions were the equivalent of mini-studios, with their own logos and all. This also helped establish brand identities that could be used as additional marketing fuel, which was the intention as well." Chris was part of DragonPlay, an internal team at Interplay but a name that was briefly intended as branding on some of Interplay's published games. As part of these ▶

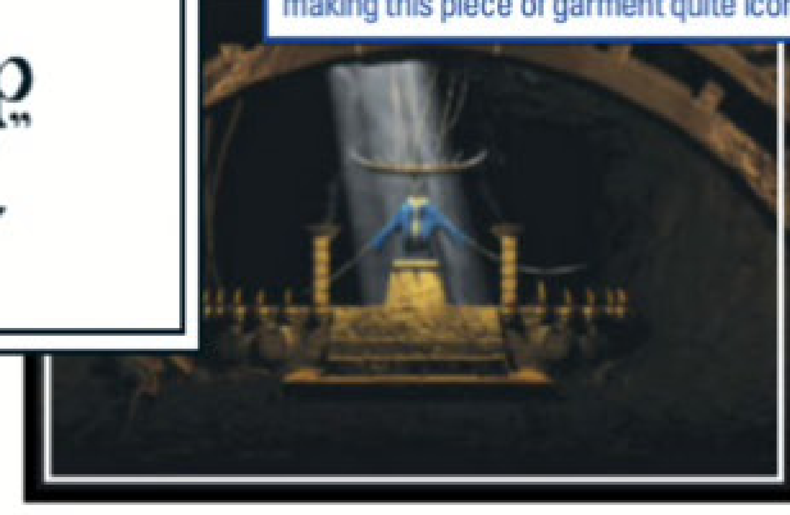

» [PC] The saga that BioWare created with *Baldur's Gate* offered a story worth paying attention to, an achievement in an otherwise generic fantasy setting.

IN THE KNOW

- The name of the studio comes from the Scottish location, which was chosen by studio leader Feargus Urquhart due to his Scottish ancestry.
- The vast majority of Black Isle's games ran on the *Infinity Engine*, the engine that BioWare used to originally create *Baldur's Gate*.
- The Black Isle Studios team was originally formed from a previous RPG division known as DragonPlay, a name that Feargus Urquhart once claimed was "lame".
- The *Fallout* brand was once the focus of a major dispute between Interplay and Bethesda that for a long time prevented any new *Fallout* games being distributed.
- A long-rumoured and anticipated *Fallout Online* isometric MMO was said to be in development; its remnants are supposed to live on in modern day Interplay's *Project V13*.
- *Baldur's Gate III* – which had the subtitle *The Black Hound* – had been roughly a year in development before its end, and would have featured completely new characters. None of the existing cast would have returned.
- A large portion of the key developers of Black Isle now work at Obsidian, the developer of *Fallout: New Vegas* and, more recently, *Pillars Of Eternity*. Follow this fine studio if you want to know what Black Isle would do if it was alive today.

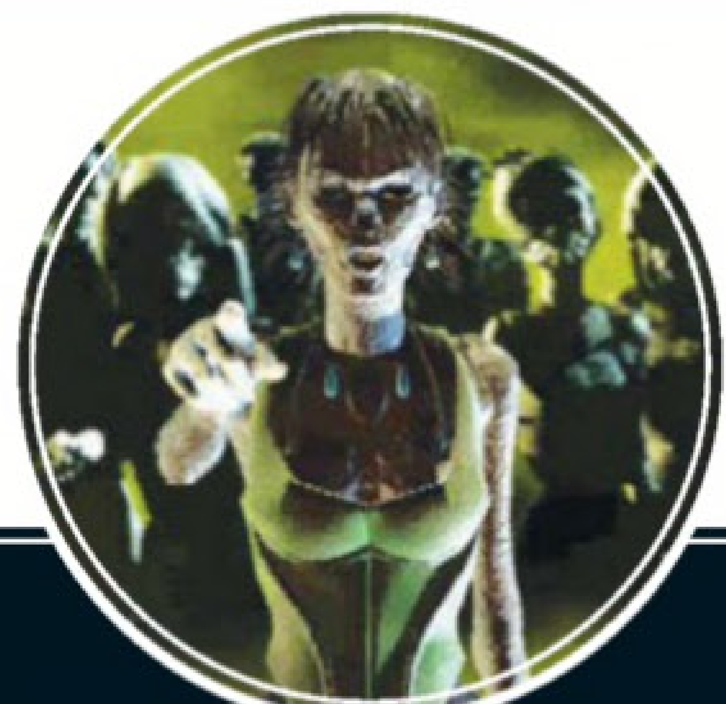

» [PC] Black Isle's CGI cut-scenes have aged horribly, but at the time they always felt like little rewards for visiting new areas.

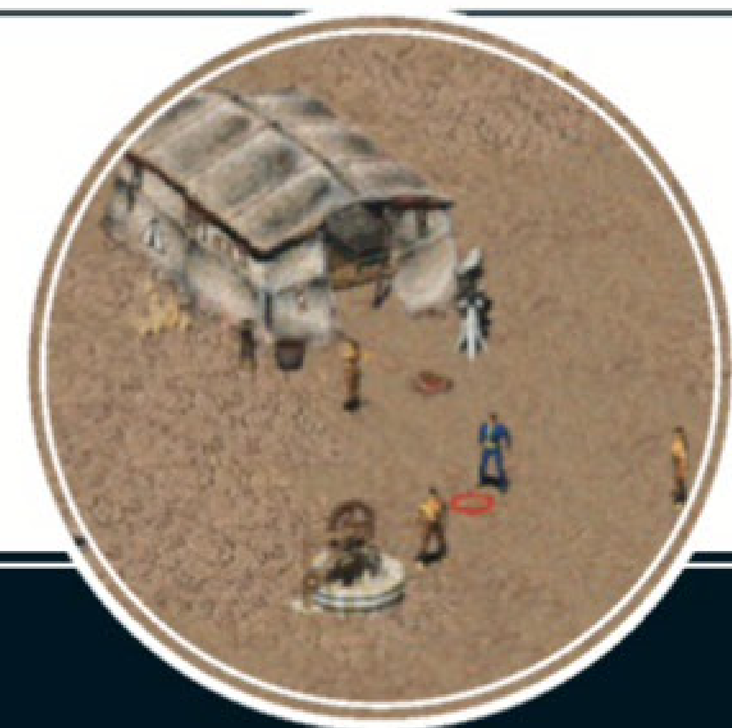
> "Making one person oversee all of [the games] directly probably isn't going to help the pipeline in the slightest"
> CHRIS EXPLAINS WHY INTERPLAY WAS DIVIDED UP

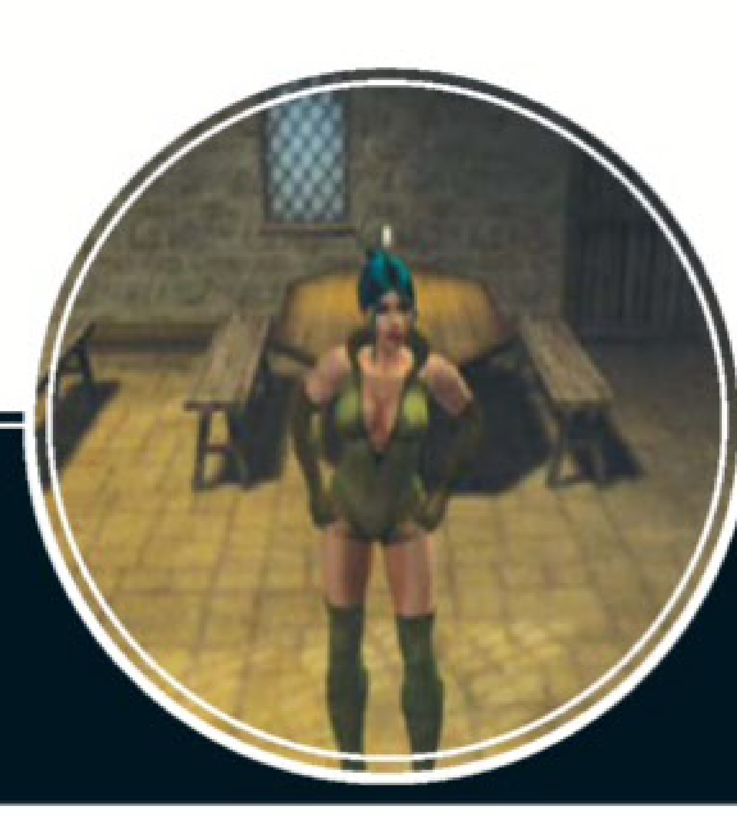

» [PC] A lot of the lore behind *Fallout* is what made it so interesting in the first place, making this piece of garment quite iconic.











DEFINING GAMES

Baldur's Gate 1998
Though this was a BioWare game in design, it is still heavily associated with Black Isle. The studio did provide a lot of support for BioWare, but more than anything, *Baldur's Gate* is a example of the kinds of RPGs that Black Isle would be known for: compelling stories, rich RPG mechanics and a great deal of player choice. It's a pattern that would filtered through all of the games the studio developed internally, and is a legacy that lives on at Obsidian.

Planescape: Torment 1999
Being another *D&D* campaign setting meant that the use of the *Baldur's Gate* engine was an obvious choice, but it still managed to stand out from its predecessor thanks to a mature storyline. Though the game was well-received critically, its setting meant that the game didn't appeal to many at retail. It has maintained a cult following for years, however, and is considered to be one of the best RPGs of all time and one you should really play if you haven't.

Fallout 2 1998
The success of *Fallout* meant a sequel was an obvious move for Interplay and Black Isle, but the team involved really put its stamp on this one. The combat and assets remained the same, which meant Black Isle could focus a lot of its time on crafting a story that really utilised the setting of the game. An expanded game world and depth of play meant it improved on the foundation of the original without dramatically adding to the core gameplay.

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance 2001
While PC gamers often cite *Baldur's Gate* as one of their favourite RPGs, so do console gamers of the PS2 era. The two are not the same, however, while *Dark Alliance* is a much simpler action adventure it still utilised the same rich world. It simplified the *D&D* systems, too, making a much more accessible, console-friendly title for an audience not overly familiar with such intricacies. Black Isle would later expand on this with a sequel: *Dark Alliance II*.

new divisions, DragonPlay would become Black Isle – all of its current projects appropriated.

This new team would be lead by Feargus Urquhart, who is now CEO of Obsidian, and its goal as, Chris puts it, was "simply to make great RPGs." Feargus was given a number of in-progress projects both from DragonPlay and elsewhere within Interplay, either cancelling those that needed it or helping to see some through to completion such as *Descent To Undermountain*. He then set about creating new RPGs for the newly formed team to work on, but first there was one more RPG to finish off. "We had a menu of franchises that Interplay had already bought the rights for," Chris explains. "As such, we were beholden to do *Dungeons And Dragons* titles in the *Forgotten Realms* and *Planescape* campaigns, so that became part of our goals. *Fallout* originally stemmed from Steve Jackson's GURPS (Generic Universal Role Playing System) system, and when that franchise was terminated, *Fallout* took on a life of its own which, in turn, worked out great for Interplay." *Fallout* was an important project for Interplay, a reinvisioning of Brian Fargo's own *Wasteland* title released years earlier back in 1987. *Fallout* would reuse practically all of the systems of the GURPS that were previously in development at Interplay, a facet that gave birth to the SPECIAL attribute system that became a central part of the *Fallout* franchise's RPG mechanics. The post-apocalyptic RPG would release in 1997, but it was released too early – and with minimal work from the team itself – to earn the first Black Isle stamp.

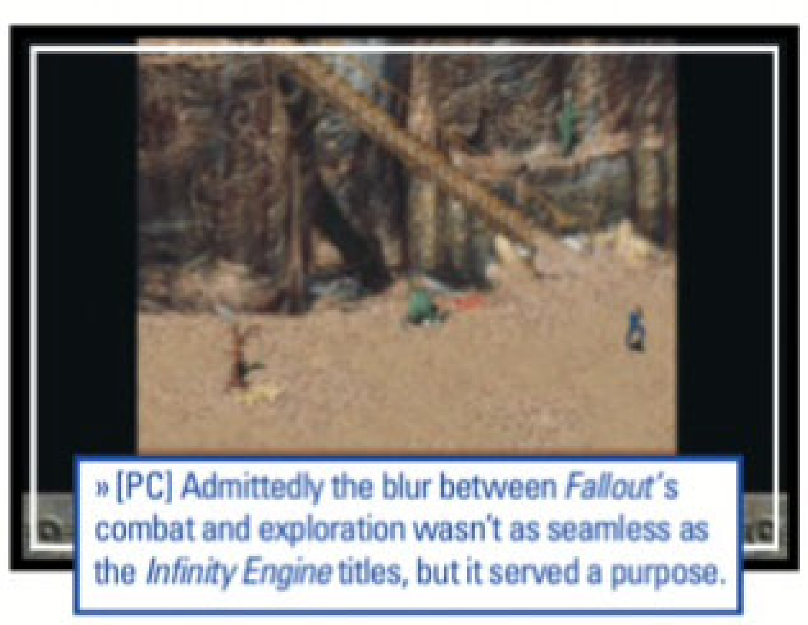
Things would get off to a rather stellar start, however, with what would turn out to be the most important game associated with Black Isle: *Baldur's Gate*. "The core audience is always key in this and other entertainment businesses," claims Brian Fargo, "and *D&D* was about as core as it got. I believe that TSR was impressed with our passion and we pitched it as us making a sustained business out of it. We were also willing to spend the development money that the license deserved. And I remember that the Black Isle group was very intertwined with the details on how to approach it." Black Isle had the rights to *D&D* that Interplay had paid for, it needed to begin work on bringing those tabletop RPG mechanics into a videogame. Yet *Baldur's Gate* wasn't developed internally; the Black Isle team knew exactly how it should be tackled, and instead approached BioWare – who was then working on what it was calling *Project Infinity*, the precursor for what would be the eponymous iconic isometric engine that *Baldur's Gate* would end up adopting, the *Infinity Engine*. *Baldur's Gate* released for PC in December 1998 and was met with worldwide acclaim, a title better than any Black Isle could've hoped for – matching its name not only with quality, but with something mechanically and narratively brilliant; now, that was very original at the time.

> "Ray Muzyka, especially, was said to have not been a fan of the name Baldurs Gate"
> CHRIS AVELLONE



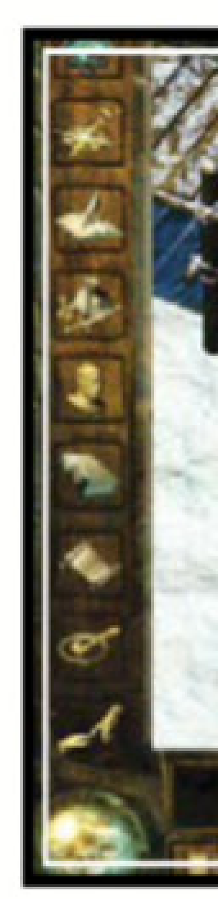
» [PC] The dialogue options of the *Fallout* series is what made it stand out, letting you develop your own character beyond numbers and stats.

The design of *Baldur's Gate* was left largely to BioWare, with Black Isle providing any feedback and advice on the game as it progressed through the development process. "Design aside, Interplay and Black Isle did provide a great deal of logistic support to BioWare," says Chris, "including testing, production, audio support and, of course, the *D&D* license. But the heart of the game was always BioWare's, at least from my perspective." There were other strengths that Black Isle and Interplay could offer, too, ones that the inexperienced team at BioWare could not and did not consider. "The title of the game, however, definitely came from Interplay," says Chris, offering an example, "Ray Muzyka, especially, was said to have not been an avid fan of the name *Baldur's Gate*."



» [PC] Admittedly the blur between *Fallout*'s combat and exploration wasn't as seamless as the *Infinity Engine* titles, but it served a purpose.

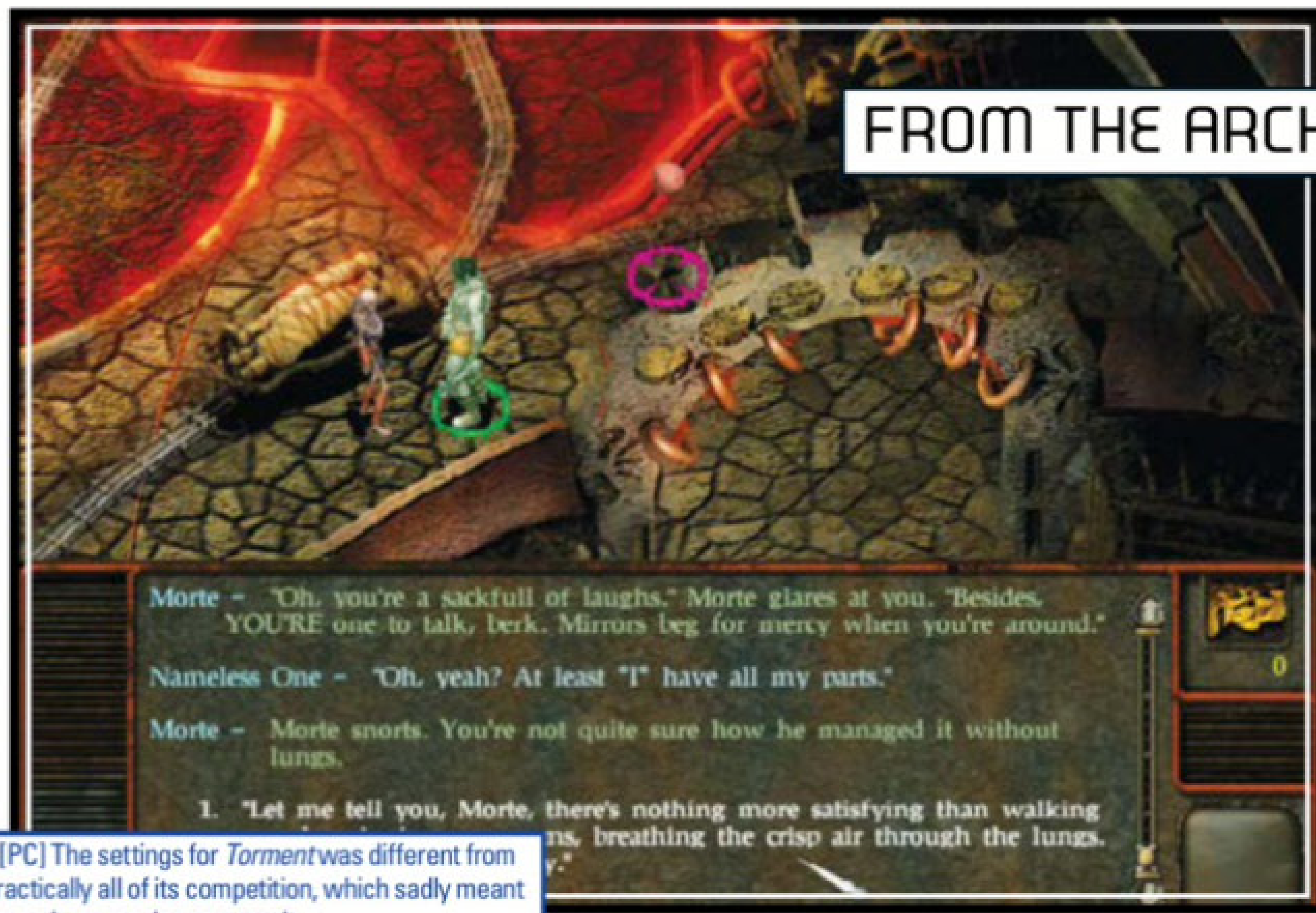
While BioWare tinkered away at its soon-to-be classic, the new team at Black Isle began work on two new games of their own. *Fallout 2* came first, the obvious sequel to a predecessor that had been very well-received. "Doing a sequel was a no-brainer," says Chris. "We had the tech, the art assets, and a team who could focus on creating content rather than struggling to do design with an incomplete game engine." Progress on the sequel was quick as a result, with much of the groundwork being built thanks to the engine of the original game. "In terms of the game itself, however, *Fallout 2* brought with it an



incredible sense of empowerment. Once the overall spine of the game was established – which took much longer than anyone expected, as it had a series of false starts – the world was cut up into neat little pieces and handed out as a brief one or two page summary documents for designers to flesh out as they chose."

Chris explains that each designer had complete freedom with their selected areas, so long as they maintained specific item and story elements as specified in their related documents. "I wanted [my areas to] be a big playground for all types of characters and let them all have a blast in different ways. Arguably, there might be *too* much to do in *Fallout 2*, but giving the player those opportunities and that level of freedom was important to us." Though development on *Fallout 2* had been simultaneous with *Baldur's Gate*, the headway the team made – thanks to the already existing lore foundations and engine work – meant that *Fallout 2* launched just before the BioWare title, in September 1998. Just like *Baldur's Gate*, Black Isle's *Fallout 2* was met with overwhelmingly huge praise, particularly for the improvements that it had made to the original title without changing the formula unnecessarily. Two classic RPGs released in the same year put Black Isle on the map, and instantly the team would know popularity.

An expansion pack for *Baldur's Gate* was to be a surefire success, and once again Black Isle had BioWare complete the work. *Tales Of The Sword Coast* would release only months later in April 1999, bringing with it all-new high level content as well as myriad improvements discovered during those few months. With *Fallout 2* complete, however, Black Isle moved on to its other *D&D* licence, *Planescape*. It was here that the company would truly make a name for itself.



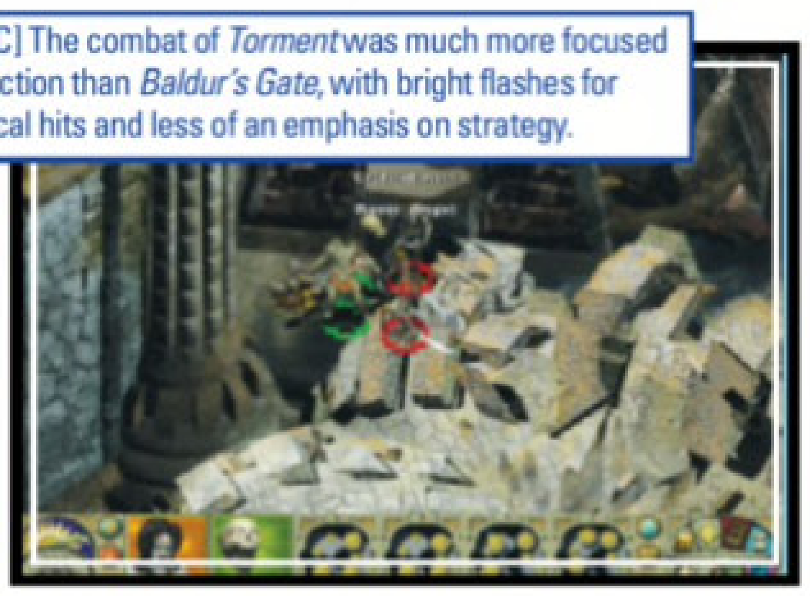
» [PC] The settings for *Torment* was different from practically all of its competition, which sadly meant it was less popular as a result.

"The franchise as a whole was just liberating," says Chris of his work on *Planescape: Torment*. "Every single fantasy idea I had ever had could fit in it, which allowed for a huge variety of quests and areas – almost anything we could imagine. When using someone else's franchise, that is a pretty rare thing." Development on the title began at the creation of the studio as one of the titles the team would need to create, but a lack of interest internally meant production was slow. "The only risk after our pitch meeting was Brian Fargo asking us if we could actually do all the cool elements that we had described in our original pitch document," recalls Chris.

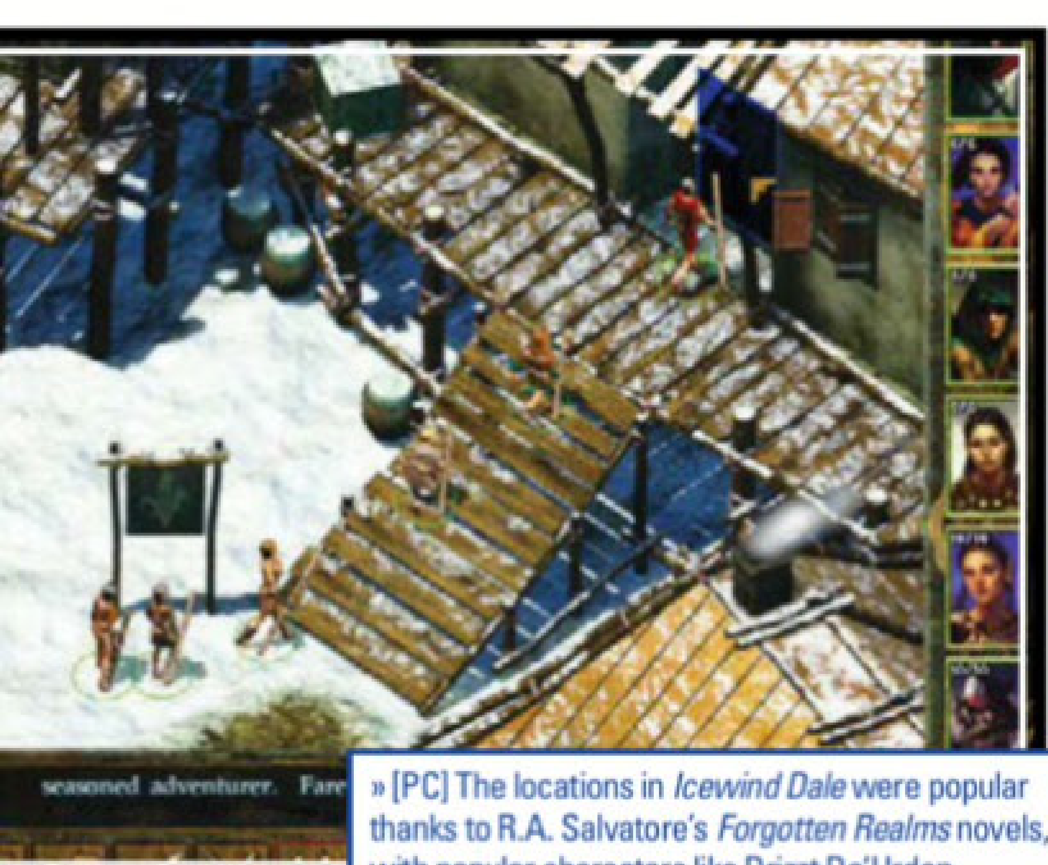
"We couldn't, in the end. For example, we never made a spell that could change the scent of a character so he would attract and subsequently get torn apart by hungry rats. We only did some of the cool things. Like Sigil, floating necrophiliac skulls, and tattoos that you could equip. But there were risks and rumblings abound. QA was suspicious of it. And like the original *Fallout*, no one seemed to care about the title – it wasn't until later on I realised this was also an advantage, because people left you alone and the game ends up having a stronger voice overall for it. So the amount of support and attention it got wasn't nearly the same as, say, *Baldur's Gate*."

***Planescape: Torment* was a much darker, more mature title, offering a rich narrative that wasn't afraid to tackle** sensitive questions of morality and humanity. It utilised the same *Infinity Engine* that BioWare was using for *Baldur's Gate* so it offered a familiarity, but still managed to feel unique and original – all thanks to the unexpected length of development which Chris claims helped give the title time to cook, creating its own very distinct identity. "We didn't really have enough people to match *Baldur's Gate* production," he adds, "which ended up being a surprise advantage in another way, because in downscaling things – fewer companions, set models with a limited range of weapons – people responded to those better than just having *more* than the previous title."

Planescape: Torment released a year later in December 1999, but while it was met with yet more critical acclaim it failed to achieve much at retail. It's darker setting did not have the same broad appeal of the typical fantasy of *Baldur's Gate*, while further decisions internally meant the game would ultimately struggle with sales. "Marketing-wise, *Planescape: Torment* also stumbled, both in presentation, cover art, and even the packaging. And revenue as well. While the packaging ▶



» [PC] The combat of *Torment* was much more focused on action than *Baldur's Gate*, with bright flashes for critical hits and less of an emphasis on strategy.



» [PC] The locations in *Icewind Dale* were popular thanks to R.A. Salvatore's *Forgotten Realms* novels, with popular characters like Drizzt Do'Urden.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

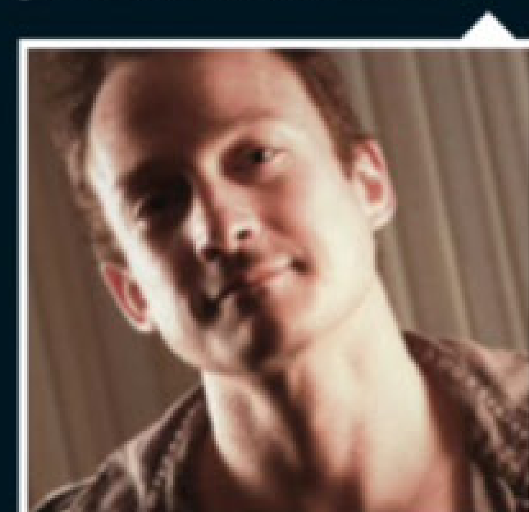


Brian Fargo

As the central figure for Interplay, Brian's role in Black Isle was more of an overseer, ensuring budgets were maintained and stuck to and production schedules were on track. When it became clear Interplay would not be able to shift its debt, he left to form InXile Entertainment where he now remains. More recently, Brian has become well-known through his appreciation of crowdfunding game development, something he has achieved with *Wasteland 2*.

Chris Avellone

As one of the key developers on *Planescape: Torment*, Chris is attributed with much of what made the game so unique. He was responsible for a lot of the writing for Black Isle's games, an element that was regularly praised. Nowadays he's a senior designer at Obsidian having helped Kickstart *Pillars Of Eternity*, as well as assisting in other outlets – most notably helping write the story and dialogue for InXile Entertainment's new *Torment* game, *Tides Of Numenera*.



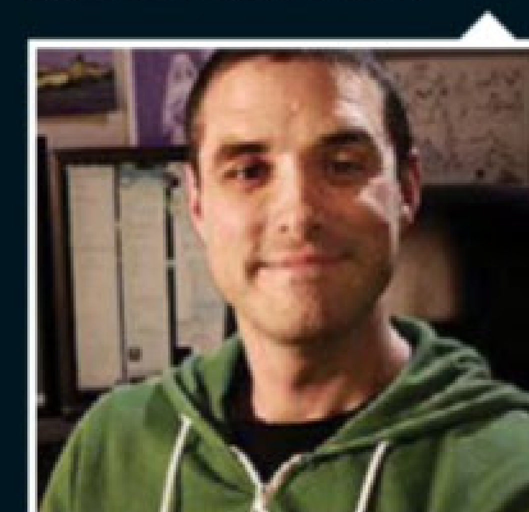


Feargus Urquhart

Feargus was the man in charge of running the Black Isle division, creating and managing the production of all of its RPGs. He was a central figure for the team, but he preferred to deflect any praise to the designers and developers he worked with. He was one of the first to leave the doomed Black Isle and left to form Obsidian alongside numerous other Black Isle staff.

Josh Sawyer

Having worked on the *Icewind Dale* series, Josh's input into Black Isle helped guide its adventures separately to BioWare's popular *Baldur's Gate* series. When he left Black Isle he went to work at Midway on *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows* before leaving in 2005 to join the rest of his Black Isle comrades over at Obsidian. There he's worked on *Neverwinter Nights*, *Pillars Of Etenity* and even *Fallout: New Vegas* – it seems that Obsidian is a comfortable home away from home for Black Isle devs.



TIMELINE

1993 Interplay Entertainment is founded by Brian Fargo who would go on to build it into a powerhouse PC developer.

1996 Due to Interplay's booming success, Brian splits the company up into individual divisions to focus on specific genres.

1998 *Fallout* is released, created from the Steve Jackson's original designs before finished by the team that would become Black Isle.

The name Black Isle Studios is officially adopted by the RPG division, commandeering much of the staff of the internal team DragonPlay.

BioWare's RPG *Baldur's Gate* is published by Black Isle shortly after the release of *Fallout*.

1999 Black Isle releases its own game built on the *Baldur's Gate* engine, in the form of the much darker RPG *Planescape: Torment*.

2000 The PlayStation 2 is released and would become the most popular games console ever, leading the gaming community away from PCs and into the living room. Sadly, this would ultimately result in Interplay's demise.

Icewind Dale is released, another game set in the *Forgotten Realms* campaign – but this one is developed at Black Isle.

Black Isle helps publish BioWare's second game, *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows Of Amn*, and would be met with more critical acclaim and success.

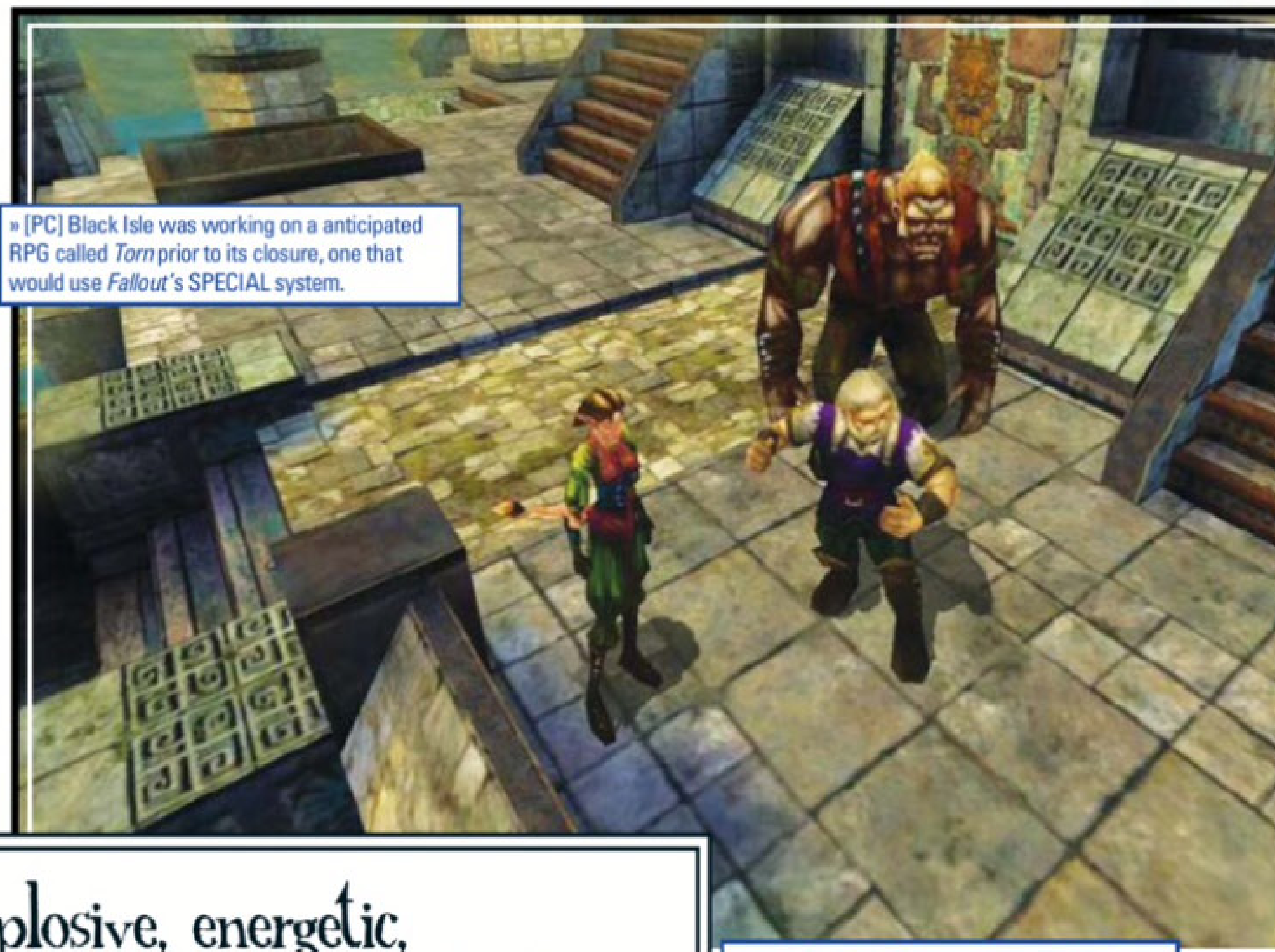
2002 *Icewind Dale II* is release and would end up being the last PC RPG from Black Isle built on the *Baldur's Gate Infinity Engine*.

2003 The *D&D* license is lost to an 'accounting error', meaning work on *Baldur's Gate III* had halted and, eventually, cancelled.

Ahead of the impending closure of Black Isle and shaken by the unfair loss of work on *Baldur's Gate III*, division director Feargus Urquhart resigns to form Obsidian Entertainment.

Despite Black Isle's success and as part of on-going financial problems at Interplay, the Black Isle Studio is officially closed in December of this year.

2004 The last game developed by Black Isle – *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II* for PC – is released, despite the studios closure months prior.



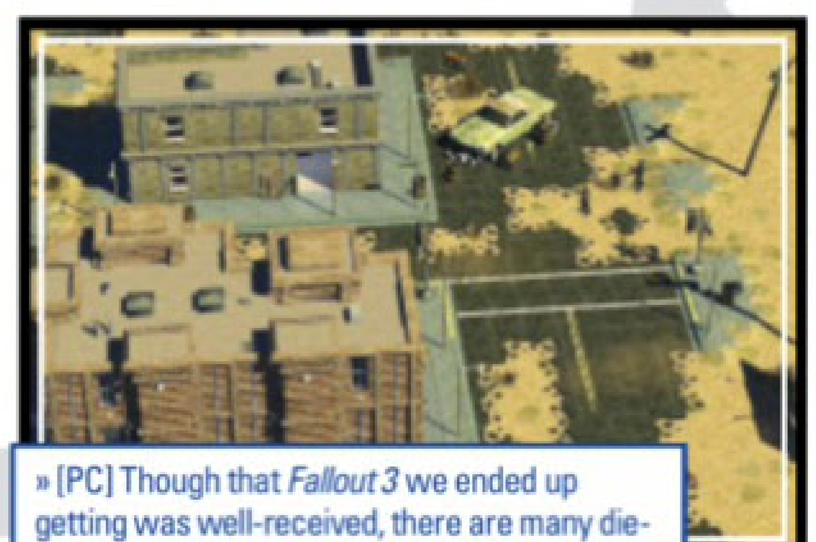
» [PC] Black Isle was working on a anticipated RPG called *Torn* prior to its closure, one that would use *Fallout's* SPECIAL system.

▶ definitely reinforced the alien nature of the planes, the *Planescape: Torment* box was bizarre. It caught your attention, but I don't know if it held it enough for someone to shell out a good chunk of change to buy it. "

However its cult following meant that it wouldn't be until years later that *Planescape: Torment* would earn its recognition as a classic, meaning for Black Isle, at the time, the game was considered something of a failure – though its heavy praise from the media would soften some of the concerns surrounding low sales. The answer was obvious, then; Black Isle was to stick to *Forgotten Realms* for the time being – a campaign which had previously proven itself to produce succesful games, having seen the huge success in *Baldur's Gate*. BioWare was once more called in to create *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows Of Amn* (which was released in September 2000) and, later, another expansion pack entitled *Throne Of Bhaal* (which was released in June 2001), and this time its development would run more closely to that of Black Isle's own work on *Forgotten Realms*.

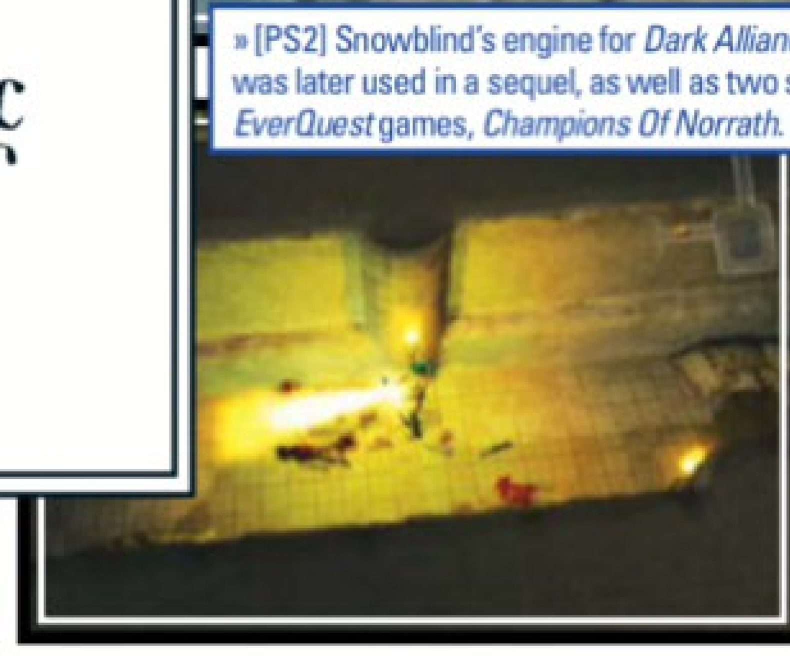
> "Explosive, energetic, enthusiastic, a little chaotic and crowded – all part of Interplays growth spurt"
> CHRIS ON WORKING AT BLACK ISLE

The developer continued with the *Fogotten Realms* campaign setting, this time delving into the northern reachers of the realms with a brand-new title, *Icewind Dale*. "A lot of the pressure came from within the studio," says Chris of the team's work on *Icewind Dale*. "Attempts to revamp the ruleset for 3rd edition of rules definitely caused some crushing hours for the programmers in an attempt to expand the coded rules. Other aspects were incredibly easy to implement – such as the spell transitions – but other aspects certainly weren't."



» [PC] Though that *Fallout 3* we ended up getting was well-received, there are many die-hard fans who lament the loss of *Van Buren*.

It was a much more concise adventure than what *Baldur's Gate* had been, restricting player exploration to specific self-contained zones, many of which would only become available at certain points of the quests. *Icewind Dale* would release in June 2000, implementing a mainy new engine and mechanical improvements over *Baldur's Gate* that would also be carried over to its sequel, *Baldur's Gate II*. Both titles were met with great praise, and though *Icewind Dale* didn't garner the same sort of sales and popularity that *Baldur's Gate II* would achieve, both of the games were widely regarded as some of the best RPG experiences of the year.



» [PS2] Snowblind's engine for *Dark Alliance* was later used in a sequel, as well as two similar *EverQuest* games, *Champions Of Norrath*.

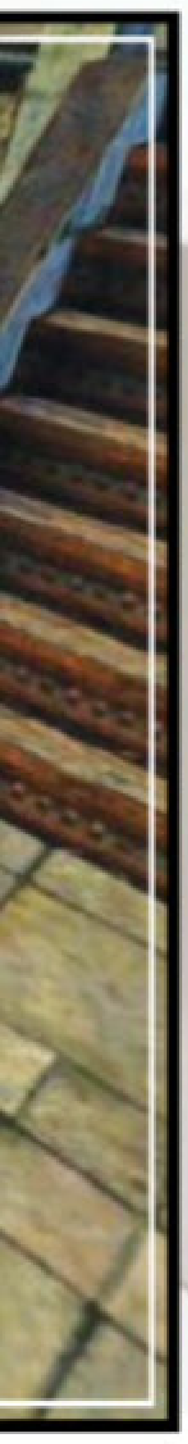
At this point Black Isle had managed to quickly create a name for itself as a developer of great RPGs, and the team knew that. "It felt *great*," says Chris of Black Isle's reputation for great RPGs and great writing. "It's why I play RPGs. A big part of the thrill I get out of design is developing characters, storylines, and then letting players explore the world. It's a legacy that's we've carried with us to Obsidian." This was a team that knew and understood what made a great RPG, and was rewarded for it as a result. Chris described his time at Interplay and Black Isle as "explosive, energetic, enthusiastic, a little chaotic and crowded," adding that it was "all part of Interplay's growth spurt. There were many divisions, covering almost every genre we could dip out hand into, and turning out a stream of titles."



RETURN TO THE ISLAND

But it's not the one you might fondly remember...

In 2012 Interplay – yes, the company is still alive, in a fashion – announced it was reviving Black Isle Studios. The news was met with excitement, until many began to speak out. Brian Fargo is now working at inXile Entertainment and has no association with the current Interplay, while the majority of the Black Isle team now work at Obsidian. This new Black Isle is working on what is only known as *Project V13*, but few details are really known about this game – with very little information since its announcement. It was said to be similar to the systems in place for *Fallout Online* (which was allegedly in development at Interplay previously), but with none of the original development team at this new Black Isle it'd be a tough ask to get excited about any game coming out from this studio just yet.



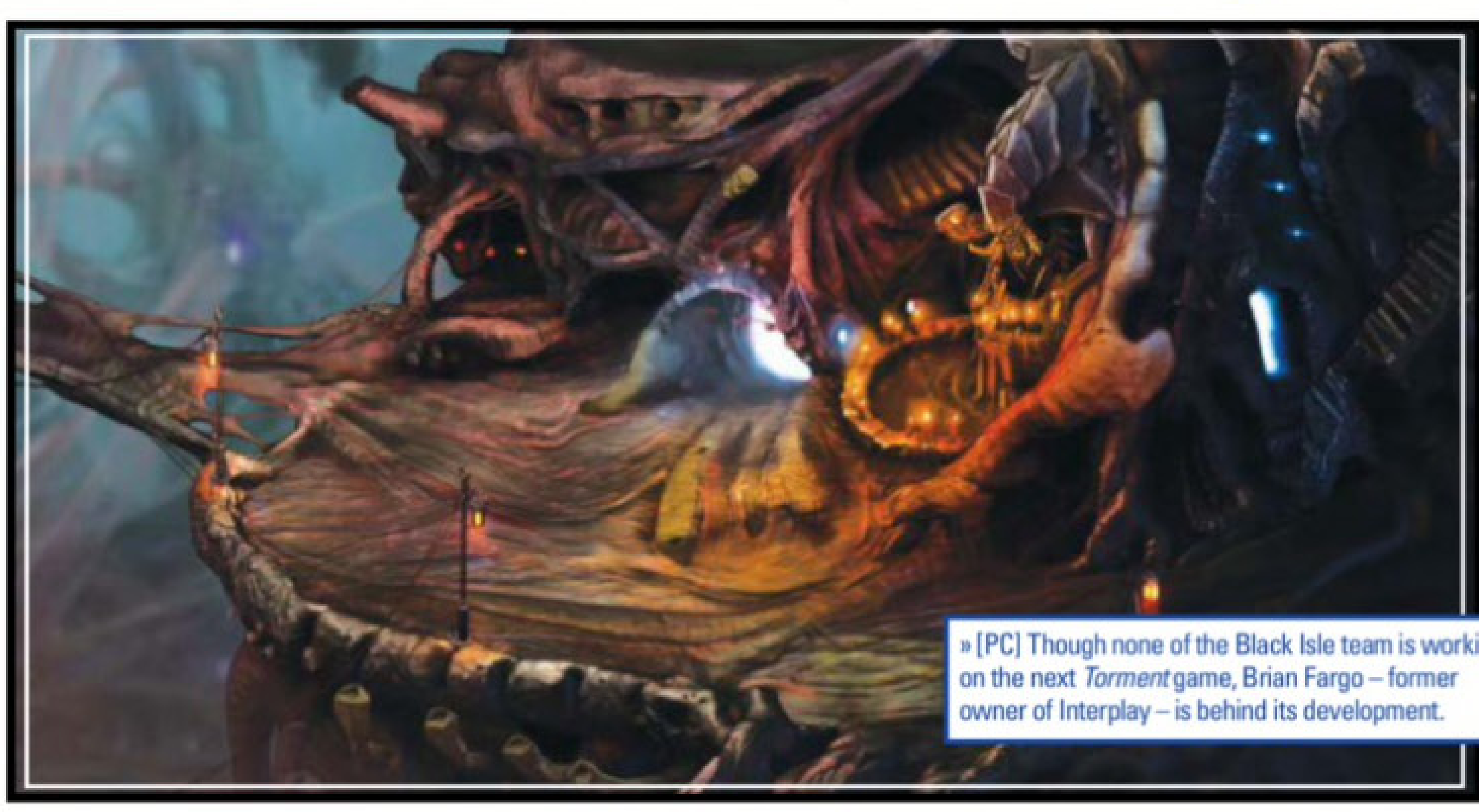


Brian Fargo believed it was the team's interest in RPGs that helped their success. "They were passionate about RPGs," he says, "they were tightly focused which allowed them a craftsman type approach to the genre. Feargus Urquhart did an absolutely fantastic job of leading them."

A sequel to *Icewind Dale* was released in 2002, again offering up even more improvements to the tried-and-tested systems already in place. Black Isle would return to publishing once more, too, helping to release Reflexive Entertainment's forgotten *Diablo II* clone, *Lionheart: Legacy Of The Crusader* but, more importantly, a PS2 title from Snowblind Studios set in the *Baldur's Gate* world. The game offered a much more console-friendly experience, taking away the real-time with pause combat and replacing it with hack 'n' slash mechanics. It was met with great praise, if not the same unanimous acclaim that its PC brothers had been awarded. It filled a necessary gap for Black Isle and Interplay, but was sadly one of the rarer successes for Interplay in the console market. Black Isle itself would work on a sequel to *Dark Alliance* that it would eventually release in January 2004; despite the studios' closure only a month prior.

At the time Black Isle had been working on its next big set of releases, having now taken full control of *Baldur's Gate* from BioWare as well as working on *Fallout 3* – which was then known as *Van Buren* – and new, innovative RPG in the form of *Torn*. All of its projects would not see the light of day, though, and the team at Black Isle Studios would be disbanded. Interplay couldn't afford to keep up the costs of development as the PC market moved ever more into the console market with the PS2 and Xbox. "There was about a year's worth of progress, give or take some months," says Chris of the progress on both *Baldur's Gate III* and *Van Buren*. "Then we got word we lost the *D&D* license because of an accounting error," says Chris. "The only upside was we got to work on *Fallout* – but really, after an executive row snafu like that, it didn't seem like *Fallout* had a chance of seeing the light of day. The loss of *Baldur's Gate III* unsettled a number of people in the division – losing the *D&D* license was an error that had nothing to do with our work ethic or meeting timetables, and the developers had been working hard on the title and were excited about it. After that, our director resigned, and that was it for me."

And with that Black Isle was sadly no more; leaving an indelible mark on the industry, but one that was sadly cut short before its prime. We can wonder and speculate of the great RPGs the studio might have given birth to but like an insect trapped eternally within amber, it is not the death of the studio that is important but the lasting heritage that it leaves us with. *



» [PC] Though none of the Black Isle team is working on the next *Torment* game, Brian Fargo – former owner of Interplay – is behind its development.

THE DNA OF BLACK ISLE STUDIOS

Strong Stories



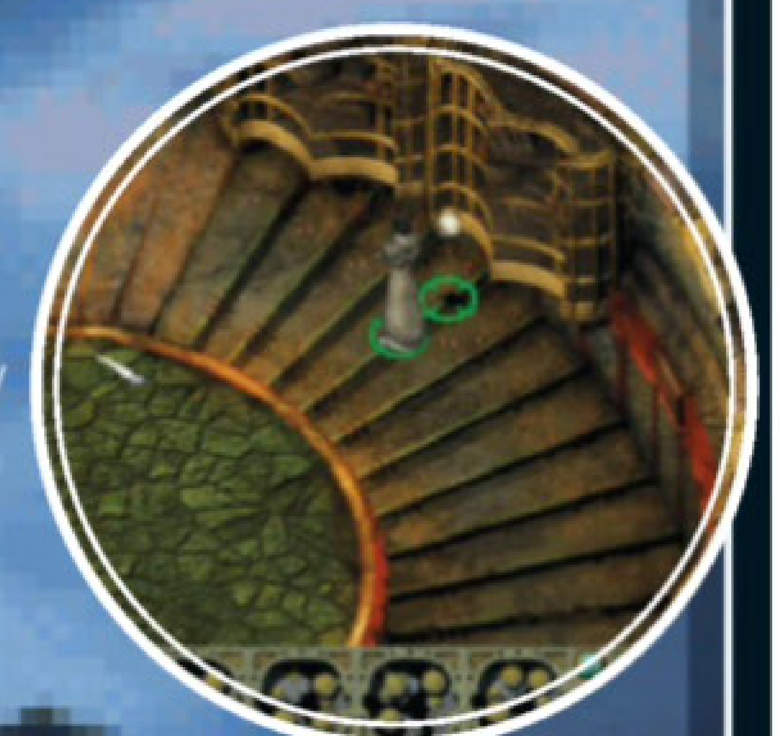
Stories in fantasy RPGs were largely considered to be hokum, little more than a set of quests to defeat dragons and slay evil wizards. The stories that Black Isle told were much more intriguing, and incredibly well written.

D&D 2nd Edition



A large portion of Black Isle's success came from its smart implementation of the *D&D* rules into an action-driven game. It gave the depth and strategy of pen and paper combat with the excitement of an action game.

Player Choices



Being able to pick from a selection of dialogue options was something Black Isle did exceptionally well, enabling you to build your own sense of who your character is through their actions and conversations with NPCs.

Real-time With Pause



Though such combat was not original to Black Isle, it tackled the system so well that players wouldn't realise that the whole RPG systems underlying its *D&D* games were driven by turn-based combat.

Memorable Characters



Black Isle's games are known for the interesting characters you'll meet, and that remains true of Obsidian's current output. It meant that each player would have their own preferences as to who they would party up with.

Background Audio



The music in Black Isle's games is often overlooked, but they were fantastic at setting a tone. Whether it was *Fallout*'s ambience or the thrill you got from combat in *Icewind Dale*, the music solidified these games as classics.

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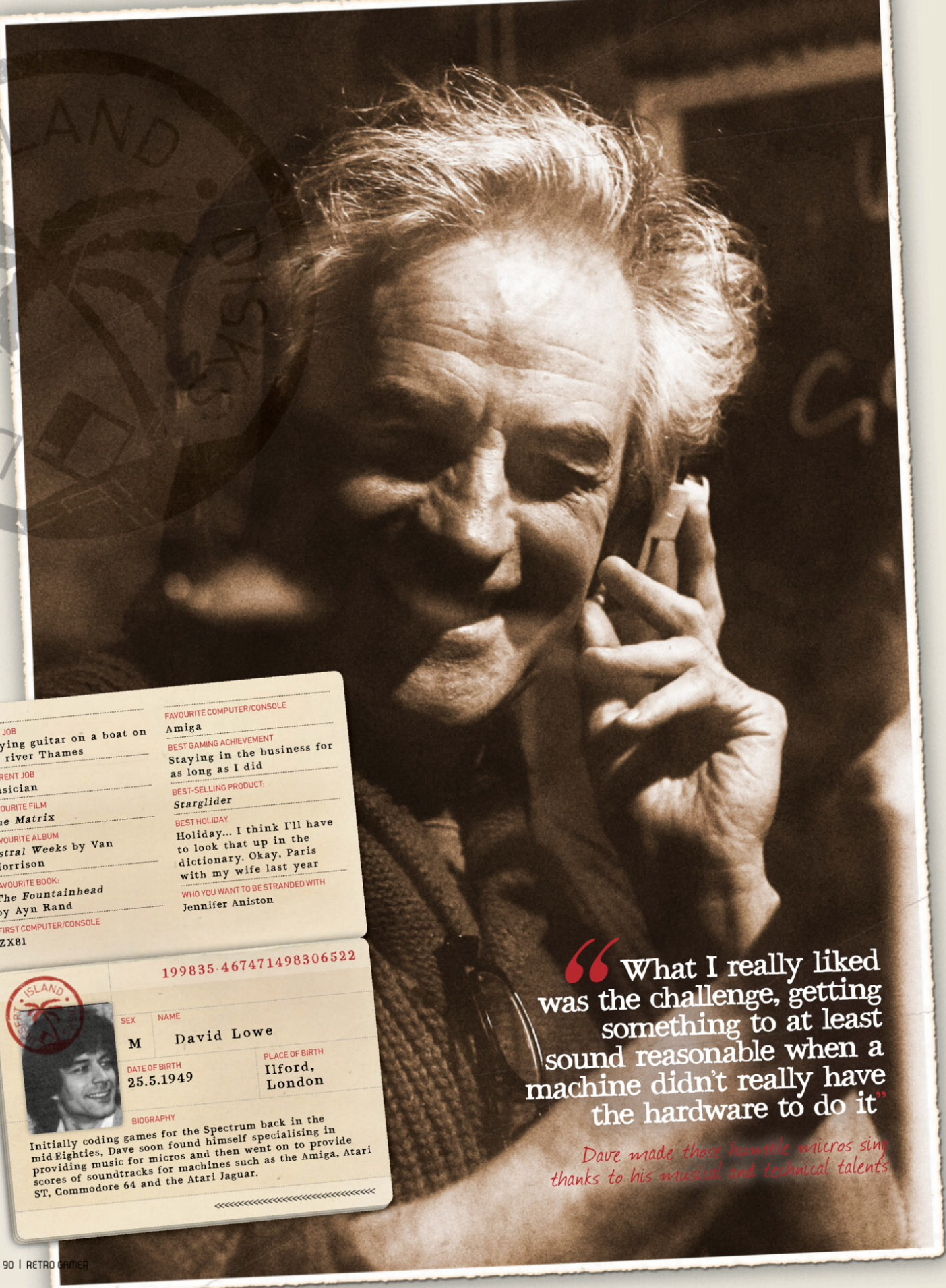
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FIRST JOB
Playing guitar on a boat on the river Thames

CURRENT JOB
Musician

FAVOURITE FILM
The Matrix

FAVOURITE ALBUM
Astral Weeks by Van Morrison

FAVOURITE BOOK:
The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand

FIRST COMPUTER/CONSOLE
ZX81

FAVOURITE COMPUTER/CONSOLE
Amiga

BEST GAMING ACHIEVEMENT
Staying in the business for as long as I did

BEST-SELLING PRODUCT:
Starglider

BEST HOLIDAY
Holiday… I think I'll have to look that up in the dictionary. Okay, Paris with my wife last year

WHO YOU WANT TO BE STRANDED WITH
Jennifer Aniston

199835-467471498306522

SEX
M

NAME
David Lowe

DATE OF BIRTH
25.5.1949

PLACE OF BIRTH
Ilford, London

BIOGRAPHY
Initially coding games for the Spectrum back in the mid-Eighties, Dave soon found himself specialising in providing music for micros and then went on to provide scores of soundtracks for machines such as the Amiga, Atari ST, Commodore 64 and the Atari Jaguar.

<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<

"What I really liked was the challenge, getting something to at least sound reasonable when a machine didn't really have the hardware to do it"

Dave made those humble micros sing thanks to his musical and technical talents

David Lowe

What cherished games would you take to the island?

In the Eighties and Nineties, Dave Lowe made many a home micro sing, creating music for such games as Starglider, Frontier: Elite II and Carrier Command. Paul Drury listens to the Lowe anthem

If you were ever startled by the elongated "staaarglider!" that bellowed from your Amiga or ST or puffed out your chest to the *Frontier* theme, you have Dave Lowe's wife, Victoria, to thank.

"I'd come home from a gig and be tapping on the table," smiles Dave, his impressive mane of hair a little paler than we remember it from the December 1986 issue of *Sinclair User*. "All the next day I'd be tapping, banging on stuff, picking up a guitar, waiting to go to the next gig. It'd really annoy my wife. I'd be so restless she'd say, 'you need a hobby!'"

Fortunately for Mrs Lowe's sanity, Dave spotted an advert for the ZX81. Intrigued, he bought one and was soon spending his days tapping away in BASIC on its unforgiving keyboard before heading out in the evening to give his fingers another workout on the fret board as a professional musician. Playing live had been his profession since being kicked out of school at the age of fifteen, but as he approached his mid-thirties, he recognised his exhausting gig schedule meant that his body wasn't quite as tight as his guitar playing. So having progressed to machine code programming on the ZX81 and then upgrading to a Spectrum, he teamed up with his brother-in-law, Paul Hibbert, who also owned a Spectrum, and soon the pair were dabbling with games coding, hoping to make a couple of quid.

The first fruits of their programming partnership was *Buggy Blast*, a 3D shooter with obvious nods to the Death Star trench sequence of *Star Wars*. An ambitious debut, featuring a flashy launch sequence and some slick space combat, it took them a year to complete and both Melbourne House and Rainbird were interested in publishing it. The latter won over the boys with a £10,000 advance and the game was awarded a 'Crash Smash' in the prestigious Speccy magazine, an impressive start to Dave's new career as a games maker. "To be honest, I wanted to go back to gigging after it came out," admits Dave, "though Paul could see the future in doing games. He went off and did *Rasputin* and asked me to do the music."

It was to be the start of a decade long career combining his love of music and his newly acquired coding skills. But first, he was lured back into games programming for one last time. Rainbird, knowing he could code in Z80, asked him to do the Spectrum conversion of *Thrust*.

"It was a clever game and I really liked it," recalls Dave. "They gave me a month to do it, but I got it done in two weeks. A maths professor wrote the original and he had stuff in there like vectors that I knew nothing about. I spent ages trying to work out how he'd done stuff like the centre of gravity of the loaded ship, but I got there in the end!"

The task also entailed converting the music from the C64 to the Spectrum and word soon got around that Dave was something of a maestro in this field. It's worth remembering that back then writing game soundtracks didn't just involve musical creativity, it required the technical skills to write the drivers that made the 8 and 16-bit machines sound fantastic. Dave took this task very seriously and was constantly improving the clever code that allowed his compositions to score such titles as *Rad-Zone* for the Amstrad in 1986 and his first big title, *Starglider*, the year after. Surely it must have been frustrating, as a professional musician, to try to make music on such puny machines?

"Absolutely," he laughs. "I couldn't have put it better myself but not wanting to sound mercenary, it was a good way of making money!" To be fair, the *Starglider* job allowed Dave to step up from the limited aural palette of the Spectrum and Amstrad, to the considerably more advanced sound chips of the Atari ST and Amiga. "Jez [San – creator of *Starglider*] rang me and said he wanted a fifteen second piece of music for the game and wanted to do it as a sample," explains Dave. "I went into a studio and recorded it, with me singing on it, then took it to his place on a tape. The Atari ST doesn't have a sampling chip, so it was a case of scaling it down to a 4-bit sample and writing this bit of code that

Trivia

In the Sixties and Seventies, Dave was signed to the same management as The Foundations, once toured with Shirley Bassey and reached the New Faces Gala Final in 1976 as part of the band Scoby Smith.



Dave's most treasured musical possession, a 1963 Fender Precision Bass, used on countless of his videogame samples including Starglider and Carrier Command.

Praise for David

Here's what **Retro Gamer** has to say about David Lowe's music…





Darran Jones
If I had to choose one game that sums up David's work it would have to be the rather brilliant *Starglider*. I have massively fond memories of this cool *Star Wars*-esque game from when it was on *Get Fresh*. The stunning soundtrack and effects played a big part of the game's appeal to me.





Paul Drury
An accomplished musician who also has the technical nous to code for a range of micros. His pioneering use of sampling for videogame soundtracks back in the Eighties pushed the art form forward and it's wonderful that he's revisiting those days through his current Kickstarter campaign.

knocked about with the volume and that is how we produced that sample. That hadn't been done before."

Dave's technical prowess, as well as his vocals, thus graced the hugely successful *Starglider*, which acted as a handy 'shop window' for his talents. Soon the work was rolling in, ranging from *Galaxy Force* and *Bangkok Nights* on the Amiga and ST to *Exceleron* on the C64. We wonder if he actually got to play the games in development before being commissioned to create the soundtrack? "Nah, I rarely got to see the games and if I did, I'd always have to sign a confidentiality form, promising you'd not reveal anything about the game. I did, usually at least, get sent a brief, telling me the type of game it was, sometimes with a few screenshots, so if it was a shooting game with some kind of battle, I'd try to do something that sounded right. Like with *Night Shift* on the C64, it was a really different sort of game with this guy working in a factory, so I decided to include the noise of machines in the soundtrack."



» Schools out! Dave in 1965, aged 16, pictured with his new best friend.

For the sequel to *Starglider*, Rainbird not only asked Dave for a main thirty-second theme but gave him a free hand to produce an extended version that they could put on an accompanying cassette bundled with the game. It was a nice acknowledgement, not only of his abilities, but also of the growing status of videogame music, and must have been useful ammunition against any disparaging comments from fellow musicians that he was wasting his time with silly little games. "Back then games didn't have the kudos they do now," he says. "My mates would be like: 'You're doing what!?' But around this time, I moved away from London to Scarborough, where I still live now, and so people didn't really know what I did. Most still don't!"

Settled in the quaint seaside Yorkshire town, Dave set up a home studio and the late Eighties and early Nineties and saw him producing dozens of game soundtracks from *Darius+* to *Railroad Tycoon*. The coastal setting proved fortuitous when he was asked to handle arcade conversions, such as *After Burner*, *Hard Drivin'* and *Altered Beast*. Sometimes the commission would come with a tape of the music recorded directly from the original cabinet and at other times, required a trip to a local arcade, thankfully packed full of people given Scarborough's popularity with holidaymakers.

"I'd have to stick loads of money into the machine," chuckles Dave. "I didn't record it, I'd just listen to it, get it in my head. I'd get young kids to play whatever the game was because they'd be really good at it, whereas I'd not last long at all!"

We both wonder aloud whether these days a bloke in his thirties loitering in an arcade offering kids money if he could watch them play might not attract the attention of the police, but these were more innocent times. Indeed, there was still a call for soundtracks for the aging Commodore 64 and Dave took on numerous projects for the trusty beige 8-bit. Having worked on the Amiga and ST, didn't this feel like something of a step backwards, we ask?

"Oh I really enjoyed it," Dave assures us. "The SID chip is a brilliant thing, like a little synth inside the computer with its own unique sound. There was probably only half a dozen of us that would compose the music and do the programming. It was a small community. They weren't exactly my 'mates', but I knew who people like Rob Hubbard were and I did work with Martin Walker quite a bit. We are still friends."

Dave was quite self-contained in his garage studio, receiving requests for soundtracks, often with ridiculously tight deadlines to fit in with duplication dates for new releases. "Sometimes the contract would give you a month and sometimes a day," he laughs. "And they would be penalty clauses, like every day you were late, they would knock off a thousand pounds or something."

The size of the fines suggests Dave was well paid for his services. Contracts and cash would vary widely, from £400 for the original *Starglider* soundtrack to £8000 for a title requiring various musical themes across multiple platforms, both 8 and 16-bit. Dave set up his own company, adopting the name 'Uncle Art' for his soundtrack work, inspired by his Uncle Arthur, an interesting family member from his formative years. "He was a brilliant artist and my parents always called him Uncle Art. I thought it was because he was so good at drawing. I remember one year he gambled away the Christmas club money on the dogs…"

We reminisce about surprisingly similar *EastEnders* plotlines from the Eighties, which brings us nicely on to Dave's soundtrack for Geoff Crammond's *Formula One Grand Prix*. We can't help thinking it sounds remarkably close to Fleetwood Mac's *The Chain*, used by the BBC at that time



» Dave's original ZX81 still sits proudly on his studio wall.

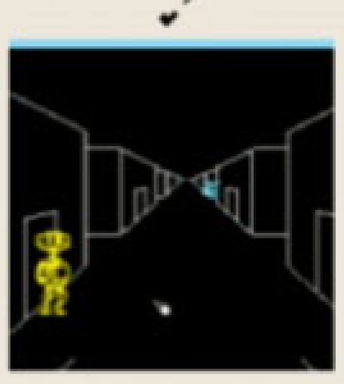


» The Uncle Art team in the early Nineties: (left to right) musician Mark Gordon, who helped out on some recordings, Victoria Lowe, who sorted the accounts, and Dave himself.

Timeline

1985

BUGGY BLAST
■ **YEAR:** 1985
■ **FORMAT:** ZX Spectrum
Dave's debut was as co-coder on this 3D shooter. The launch sequence leads to much alien blasting in a homage to the iconic *Star Wars* trench sequence.



1986

THRUST
■ **YEAR:** 1986
■ **FORMAT:** ZX Spectrum
Dave handled the Spectrum conversion of this challenging game and did a fine job of replicating its intricate physics-based controls.



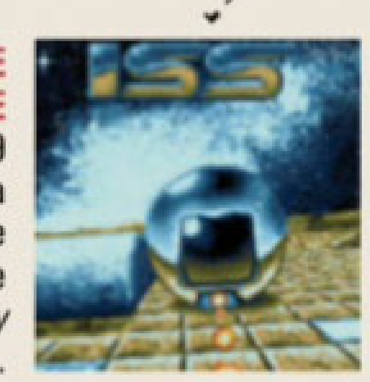
1987

STARGLIDER
■ **YEAR:** 1987
■ **FORMAT:** Amiga/ST
Technically inventive and aurally striking, Dave's work on this ground breaking 16-bit shooter introduced his musical talents to a far wider audience.



1989

ISS: INCREDIBLE SHRINKING SPHERE
■ **YEAR:** 1989
■ **FORMAT:** Amiga
One of his obscure titles is one of Dave's best works. The game is a clever twist on *Spindizzy* and worth investigating.



Chip wars

As Dave composed and coded videogame music extensively for both the Amiga and Atari ST, we asked his thoughts on the relative merits of the rival machines. "The Amiga had four channels which was great whereas the ST didn't," he notes. "It wasn't that the ST had a terrible sound chip but I do think they missed out by not putting in a better chip because it's such a good machine in every other respect. It was hard work getting anything musical out of it but, of course, for me, the Atari had MIDI. I ran sequencers on it all the time, made it drive synths and used it to create samples, which I then used on the Amiga. The Amiga obviously outclassed the ST in sound chip quality but the ST had a lot going for it. So as for which is best, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other!" Okay, so let's dub him 'Diplomatic Dave'…



» [Amiga] Dave handled numerous arcade soundtracks, including *Altered Beast*.

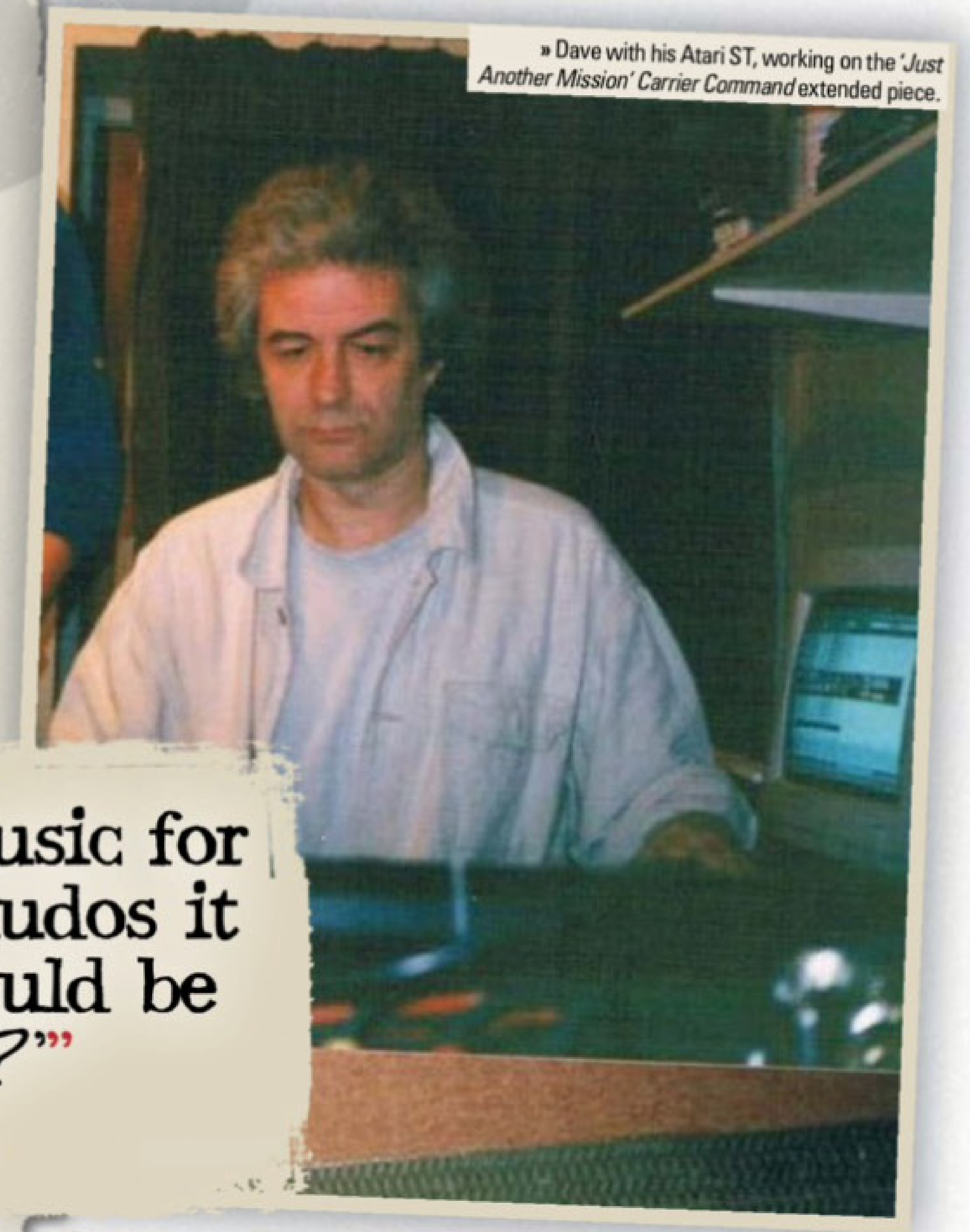


» [Amiga] The unusual beat-'em-up *Bangkok Nights* benefitted from Dave's jolly tune.



» [Spectrum] *Buggy Blast* was Dave's debut as a games coder before he specialised in game music.





» Dave with his Atari ST, working on the *'Just Another Mission' Carrier Command* extended piece.

> "Back then, doing music for games didn't have the kudos it does now. My mates would be like, 'You're doing what!?'"
>
> *Dave talks about his career change*

to introduce their F1 coverage. "I know they tried to get that music but of course it would have cost them millions," he winks, "so they said to me, 'Dave, can you do it but change it enough so it doesn't infringe copyright?' I changed the bassline from a minor key to a major key, added original stuff over that and they were happy…"

Dave was making a lot of people happy in the early Nineties, bringing his musical and technical flair to such diverse games as *Ghostbusters II*, *ESWAT Cyber Police* and *Summer Camp*. He'd always compose using real instruments, usually the piano, sometimes the guitar, and then compromise the sound in his head with what was practically possible on the target hardware. Surely this meant Dave was constantly frustrated with the disparity between what he wanted the music to sound like and the reality of how it turned out? "Yeah but it was also a challenge," he says. "That's what I really liked about those days – getting something to at least sound reasonable when a machine didn't really have the hardware to do it. And people liked it! When it got to the stage where you could just make music on a CD that played while you played the game, that ruined the challenge."

To clarify, Dave was working in a predominantly pre-CD era for videogame music, his CV even includes some soundtracks for cartridge games, including *Cybermorph* for the Jaguar and *Flink* for the Mega Drive. He'd usually write the music on a piano, use the ST to create a midi file and then convert that into a text file, using it as a basis for creating the code for the machine it would eventually be heard on. We wonder if he sorted the games he'd worked on once they'd appeared on

A Temporal Shift

Dave returns to his classic scores

After years of being asked whether he might ever revisit his videogame music, Dave finally decided earlier this year to do it in style. With encouragement from his daughters, particularly Holly, a recording artist in her own right and long-time studio collaborator, Dave proposed an album of material from his gaming days, including the famous themes from *Frontier: Elite II* played by a full orchestra, his Amiga interpretation of Rob Hubbard's *IK+* music and his work on *Beneath A Steel Sky* amongst others. Though their Kickstarter campaign fell just short of the £33,000 target, the Lowes aren't giving up. "We raised 95% of the funding, which was unbelievably close, so it would be madness not to do it again," says Holly. Head to uncleartmusic.com for updates on how you can back this admirable project.



1990

TURBO OUTRUN
■ **YEAR:** 1990
■ **FORMAT:** Various
Dave handled numerous arcade soundtracks, which often required a visit to his local arcade and humming the tune all the way home to his studio.



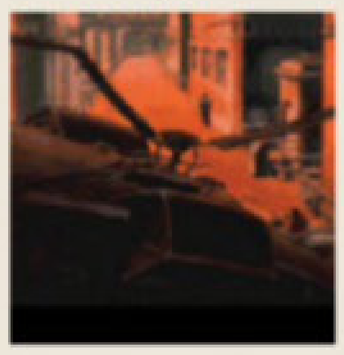
1991

MIDWINTER 2: FLAMES OF FREEDOM
■ **YEAR:** 1991
■ **FORMAT:** Amiga/ST
Perhaps known for his Amiga soundtracks, Dave did work on its rival machine, including the stirring music for this action RPG.



1994

BENEATH A STEEL SKY
■ **YEAR:** 1994
■ **FORMAT:** Amiga
Dave produced music for every genre of videogame, here scoring the excellent point-and-click adventure from Revolution Software.



1995

FRONTIER: FIRST ENCOUNTERS
■ **YEAR:** 1995
■ **FORMAT:** Amiga
As well as providing several sweeping themes for *Frontier: Elite II*, Dave contributed music to the epic follow up, too.



Readers' Questions

Northway: Did you follow the rumours of whatever new hardware was talked about and think, 'I hope I get to compose for that one?' Like the *Atari Falcon*?
No, I'd just deal with whatever I got! I was aware of the Falcon and I know I did have one in the studio for a while, though I'm not sure if I ever made any music on it.

Hiro: How come that you did excellent things on the Amiga and then when you used the nickname Uncle Art you made some of the worst music ever? *Power Drift* and *Turbo OutRun* were particularly terrible.
I did an interview the other day with someone who's a fan of the C64 and his favourite piece of music, which he has on his phone, is *Power Drift*. That's all he wanted to talk about! It just goes to show how subjective it is. That's all I can really say to that!

The Laird: What was your favourite sound chip to work with and have you ever thought about making some new chip tunes for use in any homebrew games?
I suppose the Paula chip in the Amiga, though as a sound chip, the SID in the C64 had its own thing. As for chip tunes, no I haven't, though I would consider doing something for the Commodore 64 or Amiga but I don't think I'd want to go back and use the AY chip on the Spectrum or the ST – they were really hard work to getting anything out of!

Merman: Which musicians influenced your work the most and did you struggle to fit music into a limited amount of space?
The Beatles! I grew up with their music. As for lack of space: oh yeah, every time but I knew the game was more important than the music – that was the space they had available and that's what you had to work to.

Paranoid Marvin: For *Frontier: Elite II*, did you create the intro music before or after seeing the game intro? They seem to complement each other perfectly.
I never saw the game intro. Maybe they put it together to fit with the music I'd done?

Doddsy: With *Power Drift* did you get any help from Sega?
No help at all. I had to go down the arcade for that one!


» [Jaguar] Dave contributed the soundtrack to Jaguar launch title, *Cybermorph*.

shop shelves, eager to see how his music sounded in the final release? "If I was in WH Smiths, I'd look through the gaming magazines to see if a game I'd worked on was out," he recalls, wistfully. "I would always look to see if they said the music was crap or not! To be honest, that was about it, though. I was just so busy with work."

One of his last major projects was indeed the one he's best remembered for. David Braben rang Dave up personally and asked for something classical for *Frontier: Elite II*. "That really interested me," he explains. "I hadn't been able to do anything really classical before. I sent him a piece and he said he liked it and wanted to keep it but he wanted something more strident for the loading screen. More of a battle cry."

The opening musical theme from the game was thus given a bold military stomp with a distinct nod to *Star Trek*, Dave being a huge fan. It complimented the epic feel of the game exceptionally well and is one of his best-loved compositions. Dave's music also appeared on *Frontier: First Encounters* but by this time, he'd begun to move away from videogame work. Was this a case of him become disillusioned or the flow of work drying up?

"A bit of both to be honest," he explains. "As more money came into the business, publishers wanted more control, so they'd try to get people to work in-house, nine to five, in what they considered a studio, which wasn't one in my view. Music is a creative business – you can't have someone standing over you going, 'Have you done it yet?', constantly hassling you. I wasn't very interested in that at all."

So despite being offered positions at various games publishers, he turned them down and went back to gigging, session work and production duties, working with numerous artists including his own highly talented daughter, Holly, formerly signed to Mercury Records. And it was Holly, and Dave's other daughter, Lucy, who pointed out the enduring interest in Dave's videogame music.

"I thought about six people might be interested," he chuckles, "but they showed me the huge interest there is in the whole retro gaming thing. It's massive! I was amazed. They convinced me to remake some of my music using this thing called Kickstarter to fund it. In my head, I'd always imagined my game music played by a real orchestra. Obviously I couldn't do it back then but maybe now…"

Dave's project appeared on the crowd-funding website earlier this year, attracting pledges of over £31,000 for him to produce an album of rerecorded highlights from his videogame back catalogue, including his *Frontier: Elite II* themes performed with the Chamber Orchestra of London at the famous Abbey Road studios. Sadly, the amount raised fell agonisingly short of the target amount by just £1,500, but Dave and his daughters are not giving up, given the obvious enthusiasm shown by the hundreds of eager backers (see 'A Temporal Shift; boxout).

We at **Retro Gamer** hope this exciting project comes to fruition at some time in the future and not just for the many fans of Dave's music. "Yes, I still drive my wife mad with my tapping," he admits to us. "It's just a habit. Tap, tap, tap… she moans at me every day!" It may upset Mrs Lowe, but it's also made a lot of gamers very happy over the years.

Trivia

Dave pioneered the use of sampling in videogame music and his synths of choice in those early days included Yamaha's DX7 and CX5, not to be confused with Sinclair's electric tricycle.

Many thanks to Martyn for his help with this article, Vinny for the introduction and Holly Lowe for the enthusiasm. *


» Dave and daughter Holly in the studio.

David Lowe's Desert Island Disks

Dave Lowe chooses his favourite pieces of videogame music from his back catalogue

01 Frontier: Elite II (AMIGA)

David Braben wanted all classical music for *Elite II* and that wasn't something I'd done before. I was into classical music but I'd never been asked to do a piece before. Apart from the original themes it involved all the classics that were in the game, like *The Blue Danube* and so on. This meant buying all the sheet music, which is something I had not done since learning *Apache*!

02 Starglider 2 (AMIGA/ST)

They asked me to do an extended version of the theme, which gave me the chance to do a full on recorded version, as opposed to just a thirty second loading piece. It has some Morse code in it, too. We tested it on my father-in-law who was a World War II Spitfire pilot. He got it first time though I don't think anybody else did! We might run it as a competition on the Kickstarter.

03 Carrier Command (VARIOUS)

I chose this for a technical reason. It's done over two chords – C7 and F# – and as most musicians will tell you, those two chords aren't a usual sequence. When I had to learn it to do the remake, I had to work out what it was and thought, 'this is insane! It couldn't have been written over those two chords... they just shouldn't go together!'

04 ISS: Incredible Shrinking Sphere (AMIGA)

Not one of the better known games I worked on but it's in my top five of the pieces I did. I had written it before the commission and to me it was an exciting car chase, a *James Bond* type piece. I spent ages trying to write a piece for *ISS*, a ball-rolling game, but in the end I gave up and sent them this… and they seemed to like it.

05 Rasputin (SPECTRUM)

I had to do this in a week and there were umpteen levels with different tunes. So I took a lot of existing material I had written for an experimental band called 'Repro 80' and implemented it on a Spectrum 128. Some of my own favourite compositions are in here and some are unbelievably heavy.

06 IK+ (AMIGA/ST)

The original was written by Rob Hubbard on C64. It was always a joke among musicians that if you just plonk about on the piano black notes you can play Eastern sounding music, and true to form you can play *IK+* just on the black notes.

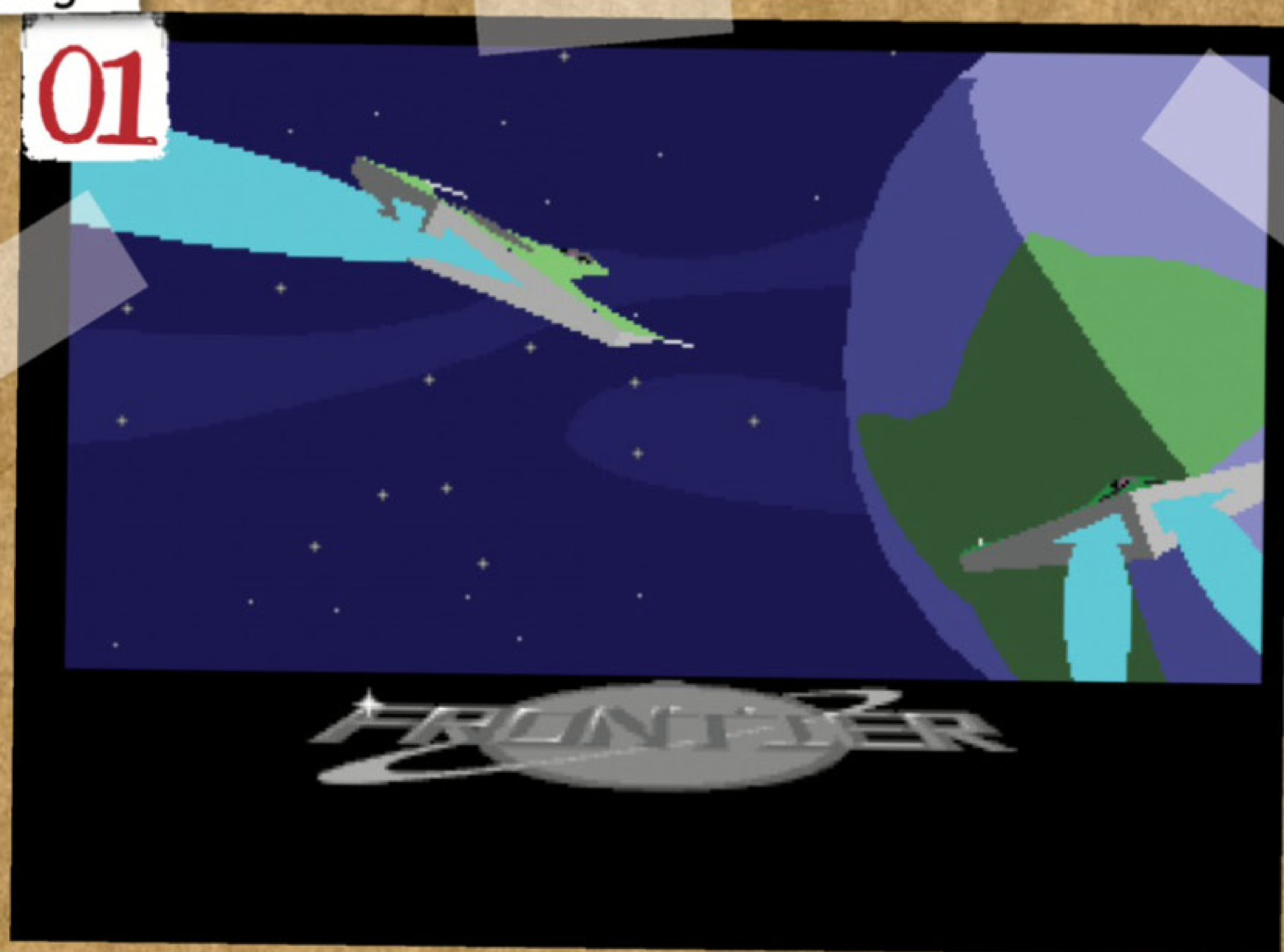
07 After Burner (VARIOUS)

This is one I learned from the actual arcade machine. I will probably get a lot of stick for this but I didn't like the original arcade version. I took the rising chord sequence and kicked out the awkward tempo pushes, added some brass phrases and other bits and ended up with something I thought fitted the action game a lot better. Some may disagree.

08 Night Shift (C64)

This is a simple little tune, but I was pleased with it as I was able to use factory machine sound effects that I'd done for the game as part of the rhythm track. It still makes me smile now.

01



02



03



04



05



06



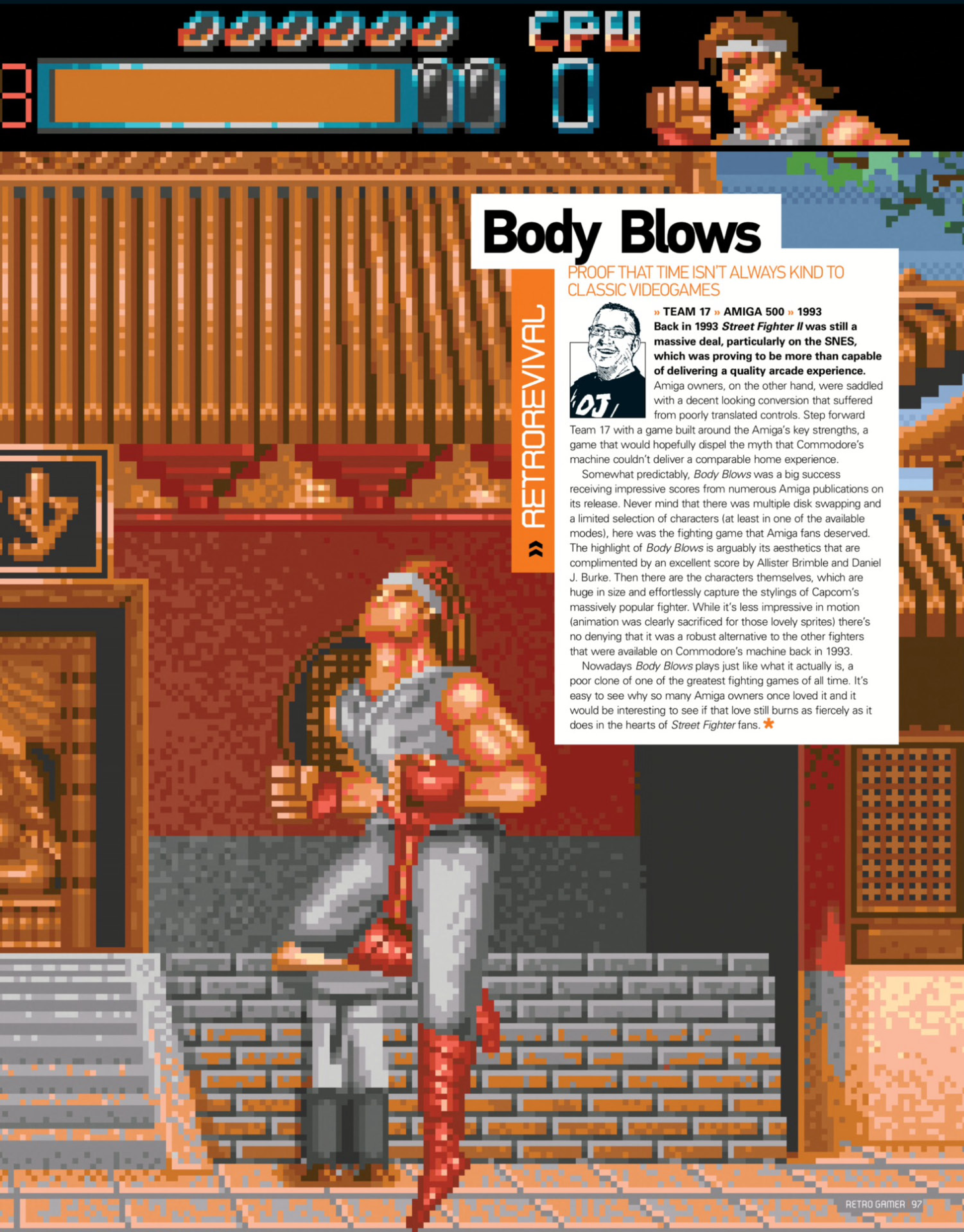
07



08




1UP
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» RETROREVIVAL

Body Blows

PROOF THAT TIME ISN'T ALWAYS KIND TO CLASSIC VIDEOGAMES

» TEAM 17 » AMIGA 500 » 1993

Back in 1993 *Street Fighter II* was still a massive deal, particularly on the SNES, which was proving to be more than capable of delivering a quality arcade experience. Amiga owners, on the other hand, were saddled with a decent looking conversion that suffered from poorly translated controls. Step forward Team 17 with a game built around the Amiga's key strengths, a game that would hopefully dispel the myth that Commodore's machine couldn't deliver a comparable home experience.

Somewhat predictably, *Body Blows* was a big success receiving impressive scores from numerous Amiga publications on its release. Never mind that there was multiple disk swapping and a limited selection of characters (at least in one of the available modes), here was the fighting game that Amiga fans deserved. The highlight of *Body Blows* is arguably its aesthetics that are complimented by an excellent score by Allister Brimble and Daniel J. Burke. Then there are the characters themselves, which are huge in size and effortlessly capture the stylings of Capcom's massively popular fighter. While it's less impressive in motion (animation was clearly sacrificed for those lovely sprites) there's no denying that it was a robust alternative to the other fighters that were available on Commodore's machine back in 1993.

Nowadays *Body Blows* plays just like what it actually is, a poor clone of one of the greatest fighting games of all time. It's easy to see why so many Amiga owners once loved it and it would be interesting to see if that love still burns as fiercely as it does in the hearts of *Street Fighter* fans. *

WELCOME TO OUR NEW REVIEWS

retro GAMER

Now on Just A Score, the free new scoring network app



Darran Jones
Editor

At **Retro Gamer** we've always been proud of our scoring system, but we wanted to create something that would be just as relevant to you, the reader. We now have that system. As of this issue, **Retro Gamer's** reviews will be using the new scoring network, Just A Score. Don't worry: the scores found over the following pages will remain our own and they still come from the same trustworthy and reputable source. But now with the free Just A Score app, for the first time ever, you can follow our scores, like them, and submit your own scores for us and others to like. It's a fantastic new system that will enable you to tell us exactly what you like and will hopefully allow you to know what your fellow **Retro Gamer** readers enjoy. Let's do everything we can to ensure that *Strider* gets a perfect ten!







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» The team are discussing what score they should give Nintendo's Robotic Operating Buddy. It's not high…

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retro GAMER PICK OF THE SCORES…



Best F-Zero games

You can score absolutely anything on Just A Score. Our favourite this month has been rating the best games from the *F-Zero* series

- 9 — RetroGamer_Mag scored **9** for F-Zero
- 10 — RetroGamer_Mag scored **10** for F-Zero X
- 9 — RetroGamer_Mag scored **9** for F-Zero GX
- 6 — RetroGamer_Mag scored **6** for F-Zero GP Legend
- 7 — RetroGamer_Mag scored **7** for F-Zero Climax



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>> This month we take a look at the rather wonderful follow-up to Wolfenstein: The New Order. We also take a look at M2's 3D update of Thunder Blade and discover if the Tomb Raider franchise works as an endless runner

* PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN
Wolfenstein: The Old Blood
I enjoyed *The New Order*, so it's great to see another game that focuses on old school shooting.



NICK
Not A Hero
It's a little fiddly in places, but when Not A Hero works it's fantastic. Long live BunnyLord!



» [Xbox One] It wouldn't be a *Wolfenstein* game without hordes of zombies to blast to pieces.

Wolfenstein: The Old Blood

OLD BLOOD BY NAME, OLD SCHOOL BY NATURE

INFORMATION

- » **FEATURED SYSTEM:** XBOX ONE
- » **ALSO AVAILABLE ON:** PS4, PC
- » **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- » **PRICE:** £14.99
- » **PUBLISHER:** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
- » **DEVELOPER:** MACHINEGAMES
- » **PLAYERS:** 1



For all its beautiful HD bells and whistles, last year's reboot of *Wolfenstein* was surprisingly old school in its actual execution. Yes it looked incredible, but it had play mechanics that could have come straight out of the Nineties, and you know what? It was all the better for it. It's a pleasant surprise, then, to discover that MachineGames' prequel not only sticks rigidly to that wining formulae but also delivers some of the most impressive standalone DLC that we've played for quite some time.



While there are little nods to *The New Order* throughout *The Old Blood*, previous knowledge of MachineGames' first release isn't essential to enjoy it. Things start off with Captain William 'BJ' Blazkowicz infiltrating Castle Wolfenstein to retrieve an important document, but his mission soon descends into wonderful, beautiful carnage that involves imprisonment, dog stabbings, thrilling escapes and plenty of breathtaking set pieces.

The New Order had a pleasing amount of weaponry on offer and *The Old Blood* is no different. BJ has access to hatchets, shotguns, machineguns, rifles and everything in between, all selectable by the same radial dial system that made *The New Order* so easy to play. Every single weapon in the game packs a punch, instantly reminding you of early id Software games, not just in how they feel, but also how they sound. Gunfights in *The Old Blood* feel immense and it's mainly due to the cacophony that arises from unleashing those bullets. BJ's most versatile weapon, however, is also his most mundane. Early on in the game he picks up a steel pipe combo that,

BRIEF HISTORY

» *The Old Blood* is one of the many sequels of id Software's *Wolfenstein 3D*, which itself was inspired by Muse Software's *Castle Wolfenstein*. Like *The New Order*, *The Old Blood* ignores multiplayer in order to focus on the main campaign. It's a gamble that's worked very well, immediately making it stand out in an oversaturated market.

IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

MachineGames goes old school

By far the best secrets in the game are the nightmare levels. There is one hidden on each stage and they basically act as little mini-games where you run around the original *Wolfenstein 3D* mowing down as many enemies as possible. While the main levels and enemies look like the ones from 1992, your weapons and any ammo are created in *The New Blood* engine, which makes for an interesting juxtaposition of graphic styles. They're admittedly simple to complete, but they add a nice diversion to the main action and are certainly worth tracking down. Be warned though, some of the levels are very well hidden.



in addition to doubling as a weapon, lets him scale walls, prop doors up and even jimmy open trapdoors. It feels more natural than *The New Order*'s wire cutters and helps open up the otherwise linear levels.

This opening up of stages is one of *The Old Blood*'s key strengths, because there's a surprising amount to do in it. While *The Old Blood* plays like any old-fashioned corridor shooter, there are plenty of nooks and crannies hidden around the environment that will constantly persuade you to take a break from the wanton destruction so you can fill your pockets and soak up the oppressive atmosphere. Gold bullions, flavour documents and letters are strewn throughout the game world, but the real surprises are the beds that have been sneakily hidden in each chapter. Activate one and it triggers a

★WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD

QUAKE (PC)



▼ SOMETHING NEW

RAGE (PC)



> **"Nods to Wolfenstein 3D and Bethesda are found throughout"**

nightmare sequence, which effectively has BJ battling in the environments from the original 1992 classic. It's a lovely reference to *The Old Blood*'s origins with the tightly designed stages never outstaying their welcome. It's not the only homage to *The Old Blood*'s roots, however, as little nods to both *Wolfenstein 3D* and Bethesda in general are found throughout the game, rewarding those who stray off the beaten path.

Even *The Old Blood*'s story is pretty solid for what is essentially a very basic run-and-gun. While it's hardly original, it's well acted and enhanced by some truly impressive character models. The game is essentially split into two parts, one dealing with your escape from the infamous stronghold, the other dealing with the fallout of the meddlesome Nazis, who repeat the mistakes of those found in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and begin dealing with forces they can't possibly understand or control. It's hokum and its silly, but it works.

The level design of *The Old Blood* is one of the best highlights of the game, keeping the gameplay tight and focused, but giving you the illusion of choice and making the stages look bigger than they are. There's a lot of variety in the stages, and it's really only the opening level – were there's a reliance on stealth – that lets the game down. Get past this and the game becomes marvellous silly old school fun.

This homage to the past continues with the rather excellent challenge modes that are included in the game. The eight stages have you facing off against hordes of enemies, with the aim of scoring as many points as possible. Points are scored for specific shots like headshots and multiple kills, and the fast relentless pace makes it feel like a shooting gallery from days of old. They're certainly not easy challenges to complete, but they are a huge amount of fun and don't outstay their welcome. They're also expertly paced and designed allowing high score chasers to rack up some really impressive scores if they're prepared to put the time in.

While the main campaign can be completed in around six hours – depending on the difficulty you choose – there's enough extras to find that will easily extend that time, particularly if you're planning to track down all the nightmare rooms. Add in the excellent challenge mode and *The Old Blood* easily justifies its low price point. ★

In a nutshell

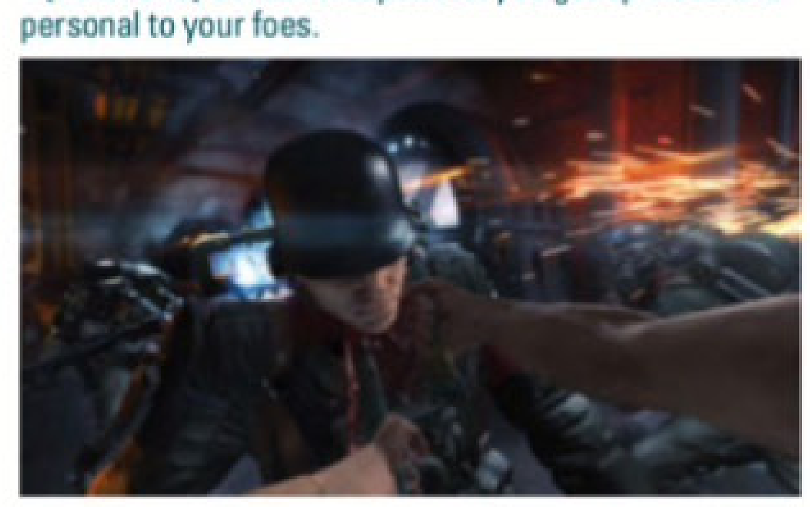
It might have all the slickness of a modern release, but there's an old heart beating away in MachineGames' latest release making for a frenetic and exhilarating shooter.

8 RetroGamer_Mag scored **8** for Wolfenstein: The Old Blood

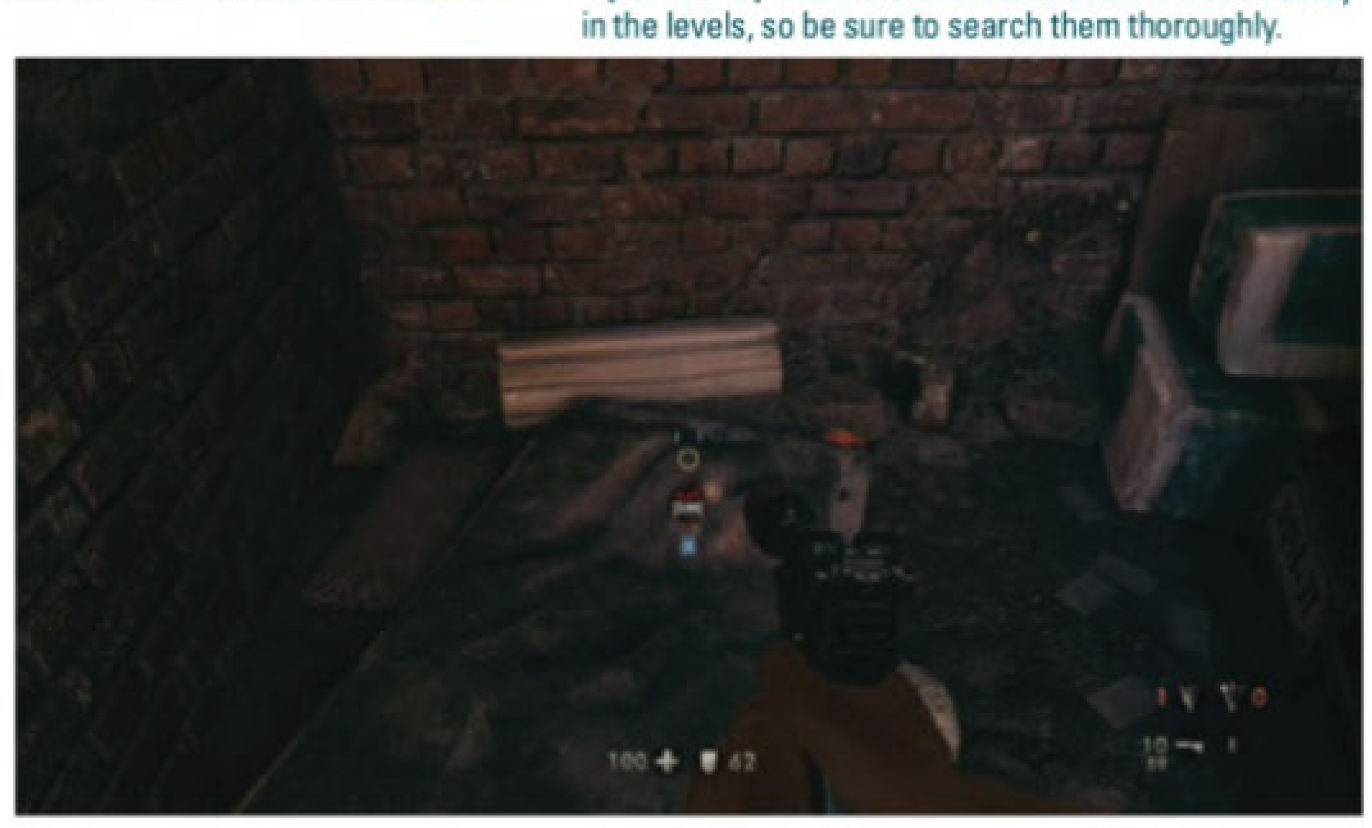
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



» [Xbox One] Certain weapons let you get up close and personal to your foes.



» [Xbox One] There are all sorts of secrets hidden away in the levels, so be sure to search them thoroughly.



RETROROUND-UP

>> Every month we look at all the classics and latest releases that are available to buy or download

★PICK OF THE MONTH

Not A Hero

» System: PC (tested) PlayStation 4, PS Vita » Cost: £9.99 » Buy it from: Online, PSN

In some ways *Not A Hero* feels like a missing Sensible Software game. It has dinky, yet highly charismatic sprites, clever gameplay mechanics that riff on well-known themes and is full of British humour.

Not A Hero tells the ridiculous tale of an anthropomorphic rabbit called BunnyLord who wants to take over the UK, which he achieves with a group of deadly assassins. Although it's a 2D action game, *Not A Hero* is also a cover-based shooter and it handles these aspects well. Tapping the 'A' button causes you to immediately enter available cover, while holding it down causes you to slide. It's simple, but it adds to some interesting combinations as you skate around the large stages looking for easy kills and the various extra items you are also asked to collect on your travels.

Diversity is one of *Not A Hero*'s biggest strengths. Initially you're just killing a set amount of enemies, but you're soon required to go on escort missions, put up posters and destroy drug dens. The mission structure is further enhanced by mini-missions found on each stage that range from collecting all the available power-ups to pulling off a certain amount of kills in a strict time limit. While you initially start the game with only one assassin, you attract more as BunnyLord's approval rating soars. Some pack different weaponry, others can run and shoot at the same time or run much faster than their peers. It makes each character feel individual and you soon find one that matches your play style.

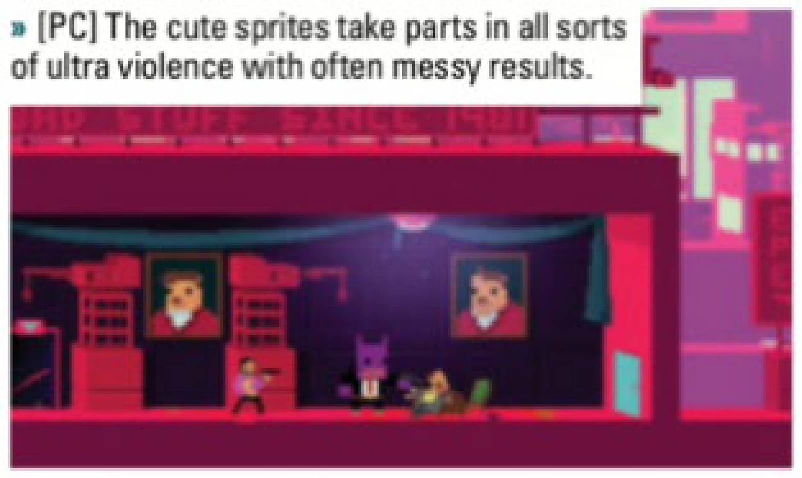
It's a pity, then, that there are several annoyances that stop *Not A Hero* from being as endlessly replayable as Roll7's *OlliOlli* games. The first is the cover system itself. It's not always clear where the next piece of cover is, meaning you can inadvertently slide your way into a nest of enemies. The placement of enemies can also be an issue. All too often they'll be waiting by doors or other inconvenient places, immediately knocking you down into other enemies. Often you'll simply die, but occasionally you'll get ricochet between two enemies, requiring a restart of the stage. The controls are very responsive and there's some highly effective and amusing power-ups, but *Not A Hero* never flows as well as *OlliOlli*, meaning you're less inclined to return to it and top your high scores. It's certainly fun while it lasts, though.



» [PC] You can't see it here but the animation in *Not A Hero* looks lovely.



» [PC] As the game progresses you'll unlock a variety of assassins, which greatly affect how *Not A Hero* plays.



» [PC] The cute sprites take parts in all sorts of ultra violence with often messy results.

7 RetroGamer_Mag scored **7** for Not A Hero
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

3D Thunder Blade

» System: 3DS » Buy it for: £4.49 » Buy it from: 3DS eShop

Let's concentrate on the good stuff first – *3D Thunder Blade* looks fantastic on the 3DS. Thanks to the viewpoints that Sega used in the original 1987 coin-op the 3D employed in M2's port is great. While the into-the-screen sections look as good as *After Burner*, the top-down levels give the blaster a wondrous sense of depth.

As with previous M2 conversions, an additional game mode is included, but it's pretty weak, adding a single into-the-screen stage and boss fight. Sadly, while M2's conversion work is sterling, *Thunder Blade* hasn't aged gracefully. It's too easy to get shot down by unseen enemies in the top-down sections, while the collision detection causes many needless deaths. The bosses are still fun and having to manage your speed adds a small level of strategy, but without the intense speed of *Space Harrier* or *After Burner* the mindless action gets pretty dull.

5 RetroGamer_Mag scored **5** for 3D Thunder Blade
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



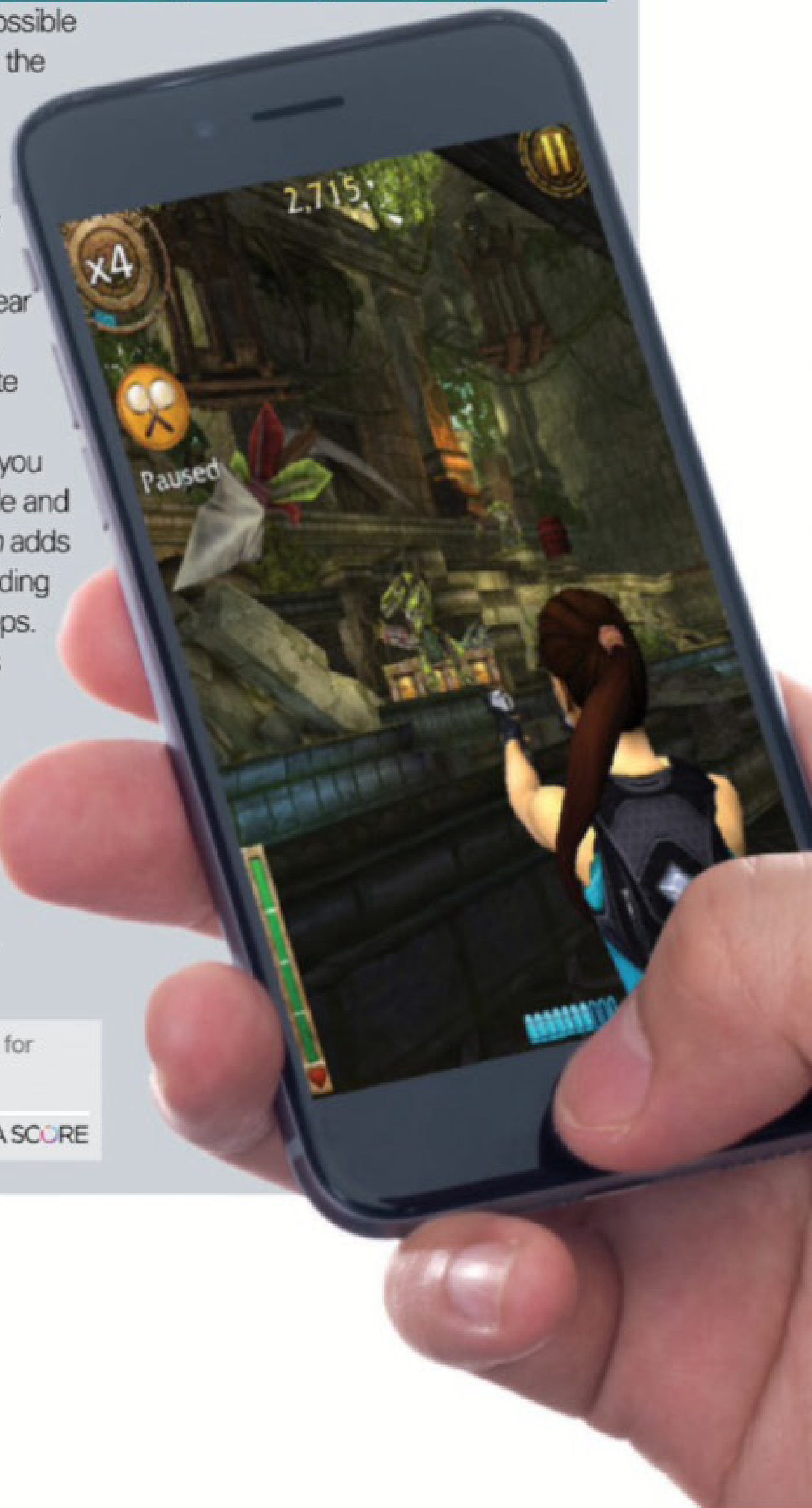
Lara Croft: Relic Run

» System: iOS (tested), Android » Buy it for: Free » Buy it from: App Store, Google Play

Pitfall has already proven that it's possible to shoehorn a classic franchise into the endless runner format, so it was perhaps inevitable that another classic tomb raider would give the genre a try. Surprisingly, *Lara Croft: Relic Run* isn't bad at all. It's not great of course, but it's nowhere near the trainwreck we were imagining, with the intrepid explorer fitting quite nicely into the well-worn template.

As with any *Temple Run* clone, you make different swipes to jump, slide and move around the screen. *Relic Run* adds a few new ideas into the mix, including the ability to wall run and ride in jeeps. It also introduces shooting sections where the action moves behind Lara's shoulder and lets you shoot at nearby enemies.

While there are in-app purchases, they never feel intrusive, while the varied levels mean the action never gets dull. A fun take on the format.



6 RetroGamer_Mag scored **6** for Lara Croft: Relic Run
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

Welcome to Homebrew



>> Occasionally we come across new homebrew computers and the most recent is the Mega65, which takes cues from the various prototypes of Commodore's C65, but builds on them to the point where this new machine is around 50 times faster than a C64. It also offers 4,096 colours, two emulated SIDs and the entire project is open source as well



[Windows] Flexing some muscles.

LET'S GO ADVENTURING

All the latest from GameJolt's game jam

GameJolt's latest game jam had the theme 'adventure' and, although not all of the entries are complete, like the promising *The Feeling Of Emptiness,* and a few aren't available to download at the time of writing, there are over eighty to browse through. The theme also means that a range of subjects and genres are covered. There are purely text-based adventures like *Brilliance: An Interstellar Journey* which tells the story of a mission to Alpha Centurai which goes disastrously wrong, or the bizarre *Slaughtertrain* where subcultures of the future are grouped together in carriages on a moving train.

There's some point-and-click action, too; *Turing Adventure* stars a human trying to blend in while surrounded by hostile robots, and *Kronan, The Librarian* is about a mild mannered character with dreams of becoming a great warrior. Similarly, *WrestleQuest* is the story of 'Mad Meteor' Mike, a terrible wrestler who accidentally gets invited to one of the biggest events of the wrestling calendar and, rather than training, instead embarks on a quest for mystical powers to help him out.

Quite a few of the entries sport a similar sense of humour and we also liked another point-and-click affair called *Awesome Adventurer,* it might be very short but what's there is nicely executed, and, it made us smile.

There are some more experimental titles to explore with *Adventures In The Gutter* enabling the player to interact with it in the 'gutters' between panels of its comic book story, while *What's In The Safe* utilises photographs to deliver a *Myst*-style quest, and all manner of real historical maps build up the game world in *Changing Horizons.* Kikstart.eu/adventure-jam-2015 goes to the official game jam page at GameJolt, which links to all of the entries and there should be something there to suit most gamers.

> "The theme means a range of subjects and genres get covered"

Incoming

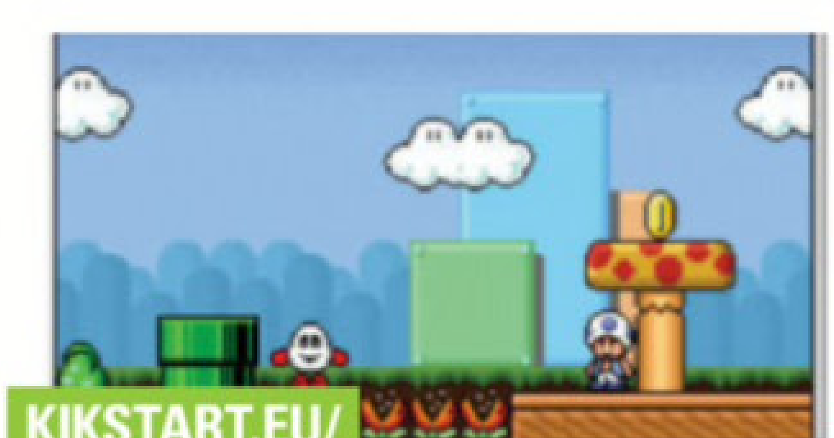
We have a great line-up this issue featuring a rather cool Dizzy/Super Mario Bros. mashup

KIKSTART.EU/BLUBB-264



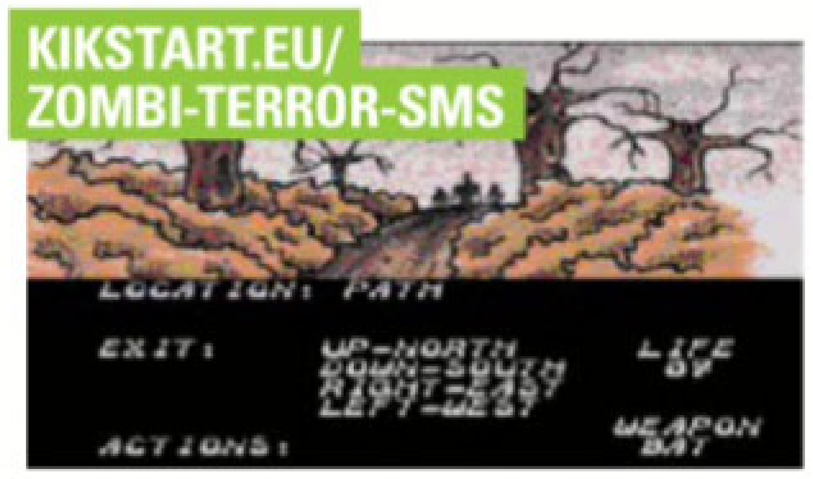
▲ There's a spot of blasting action to be found in the gallery shooter, *Blubb,* for the C16 by the talented Andreas Steffen.

▼ Dizzy takes a magical trip to the world of *Mario* with Egotrip's *Mushroom Kingdom Dizzy* for Windows-based PCs.



KIKSTART.EU/MUSHROOM-DIZZY-WIN

KIKSTART.EU/ZOMBI-TERROR-SMS



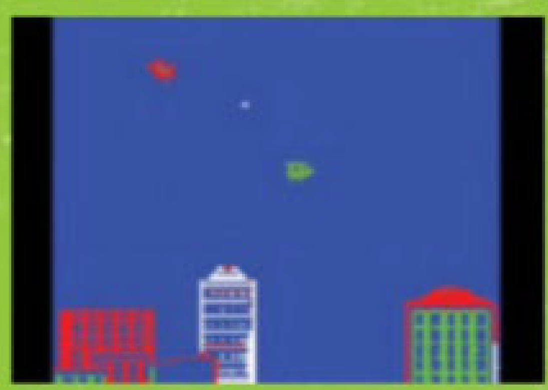
▲ Kabuto Factory's multi-platform horror survival game *Zombi Terror* is now available to play on the Master System.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

If you have a homebrew project you would like to see featured then please contact us at:
retrogamer@imagine-publishing.co.uk

SPIFFING PRANG

***JBiplane* is a** two-player, airborne shoot-out where a couple of biplanes take to the skies and try to blow each other apart. The action is based most directly on the Amiga PD title, *Bip*, but it'll be familiar from other sources including the plane-based variations of the Atari 2600 pack-in cartridge, *Combat*. There's still work to be done – we had a chance to talk to the developer at Play Blackpool in May and he's already made progress from the preview behind Kikstart.eu/jbiplane-bbc – but what's already there works and we are definitely looking forward to seeing the final release.



» [BBC Micro] I say, old chap.

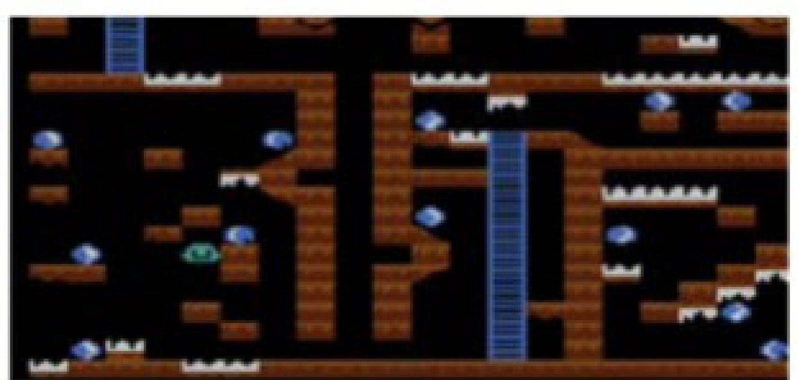


» [Megadrive] No ghosts or goblins just yet.

FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS

Locomalito's 2012 release *Maldita Castilla* has been described as an homage to the classic *Ghosts 'N' Goblins* and was ripe for conversion to an 8-bit or 16-bit system. And three years later that's started to become a reality with a project under way to convert it over to the Mega Drive. There's just a scrolling background and the brave knight in there so far – he doesn't even follow the contours of the landscape while running through the level right now – but the preview we've been looking at can be downloaded from behind Kikstart.eu/maldita-prv-md to admire the rather nice parallax.

▼ Here's some hard as nails platform puzzling with Baktra Software's *Curse Of The Lost Miner* for the Atari 8-bits.



KIKSTART.EU/CURSE-MINER-A8

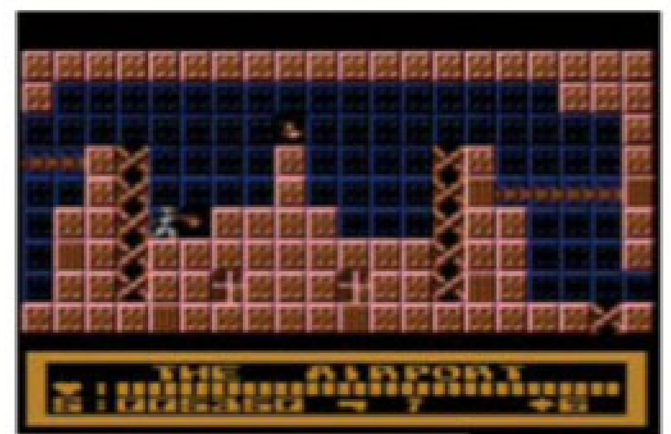
Homebrew heroes



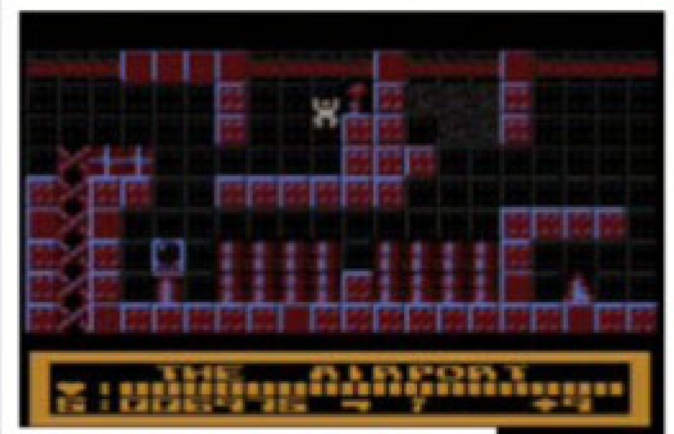
Kemal Ezcan was one of the developers behind Tecno Ninja a quarter of a century ago and is responsible for the recently released anniversary edition, too. We snuck up on him for a chat about packaging and the process of reworking his code

Where did the original idea of a remixed version of *Tecno Ninja* come from?
I was browsing the Atari Age forums and was very surprised that there are a lot of people still developing homebrew games for both the Atari VCS 2600 and the 8-bit systems. I also play *Tecno Ninja* from time to time, because it's just a very cool and challenging game. Then, I had the idea: 20 years ago, we wanted to have nice colourful boxes and instruction booklets, but at that time it just wasn't possible (in a small quantity). Since my main business now is producing board games, I have all the equipment to make nice boxes, so I thought, why not make it the way exactly how we wanted it before?

Was it difficult returning to the code after 25 years?
Yes and no. Somehow I lost my source code disks, so there was no way to actually modify the game itself. I started by coding a 'level decoder', that loads a level, shows it as a map and also shows me the parameters.



» [Atari 8-bit] Nothing to be found.

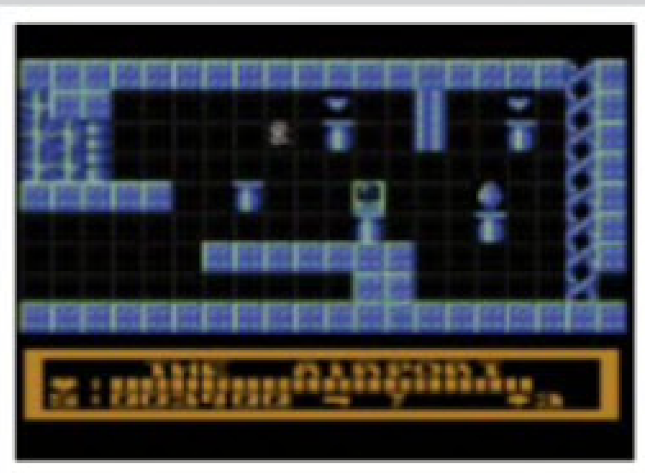


» [Atari 8-bit] That looks important.

I used this to create the printed level maps that are included in the box. I quickly noticed that I still remembered how to code the Atari, except, of course, after having to look up some of the memory registers.

And how long did it take to develop compared to the original game?
The original game took me and my partner Marc, at that time, several months, I don't exactly remember how many but it was a lot of fun creating, testing and tweaking the levels. For the new edition, I created the physical box, instructions, maps and I also made a new title screen in the game together with new music.

Did you consider making any further changes to the *Tecno Ninja*'s gameplay?
I thought about changing the levels, graphics and music. But later I dismissed that idea and wanted to have the Anniversary Edition instead. Since I'm planning a *Tecno Ninja 2*, this one will either be the same basic game with new graphics, music and levels, or I will completely write an entirely new one from scratch.

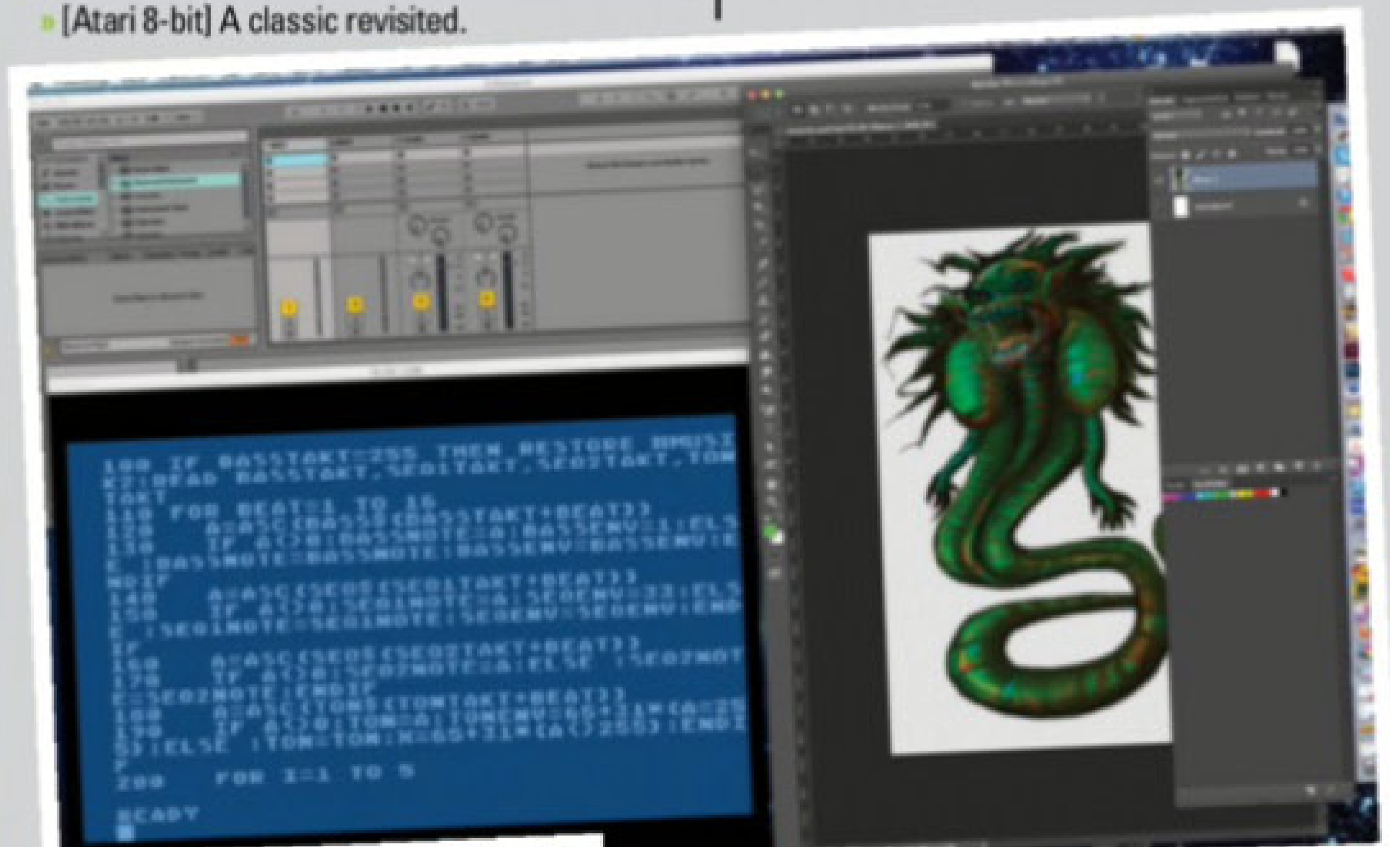


» [Atari 8-bit] A classic revisited.

What feedback have you received from players?
So far everyone is quite excited with the nice colourful big box and materials. No one gave me any comments on the game itself yet, looks like they are just putting it in their collection rather than actually playing it.

And finally, do you have any future plans our readers might be interested in?
Oh yes, quite a lot! At the moment I'm setting up a 'live room escape game' business in Frankfurt, where I live. You can check it out at EscapeAdventures.de.

I'm planning to make at least one game for the Atari 2600, and one for the 8-bit, probably *Tecno Ninja 2*. Also I made *Retrory*, a memo-type game with 2600 sprites that will get an expansion pack soon. You can find that on Atari Age. I also planned a retro gaming printed magazine, but for that project I will need help from some content contributors. I am constantly updating my website, YodasVideoArcade.com, with new retro online games. And I just finished a version of my book, *Gulp Splat Zong*, in full colour with pictures. I'm planning to eventually translate that to English. You can find that at GulpSplatZong.de.

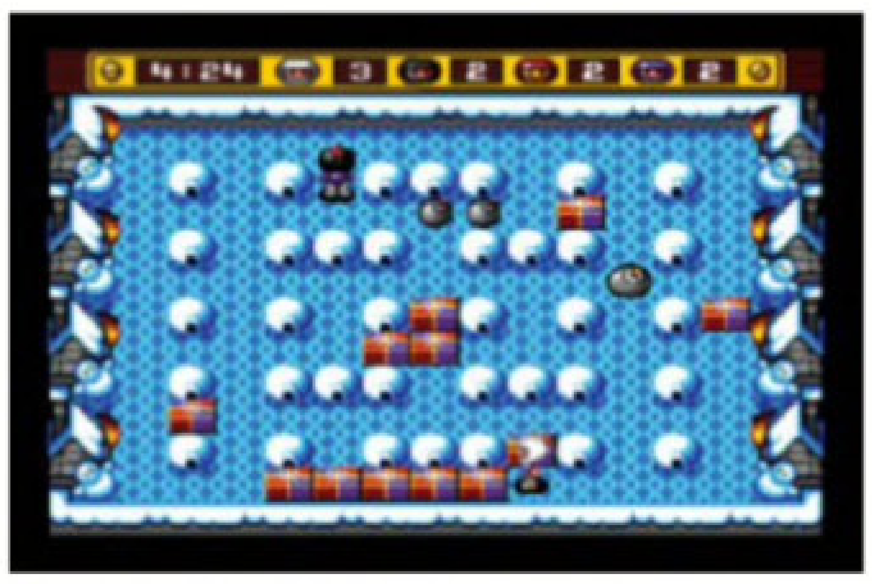


» [Atari 8-bit] A dismantled *Tecno Ninja*.

Even more Homebrew REVIEWS



» [Apple IIGS] Failing the challenge.



» [Apple IIGS] There's simply no place to go.

KABOOM!

» **FORMAT:** APPLE IIGS » **DEVELOPER:** NINJAFORCE
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/KABOOM-A2 » **PRICE:** FREE

There have been quite a few *Bomber Man*-style games recently, but *Kaboom!* is the first homebrew version we've seen released on the Apple IIGS. Put together by seasoned developers, Ninjaforce – whose previous credits include some impressive demos and the graphics for the IIGS conversion of *Wolfenstein 3D* – it certainly looks and sounds the part and the Apple's hardware is put to good use.

The default battle mode is tough, challenging the player to blow up every destructible block in a level within a strict time limit and offering little room for error to the point where even a moment's hesitation to avoid one of the roaming nasties can lead to the timer expiring. But, despite often finding ourselves with just one block remaining and not quite enough time to destroy it, we did enjoy the mental exercise of competing against the level designer while working out the fastest route through each stage. The campaign mode also gives the player an editor to create similar challenges for themselves and others as well if the built in stages prove too easy.

> "It's the multiplayer battle modes where Kaboom! really shines"

But it's the multiplayer battle modes where *Kaboom!* really shines, though, with four players competing against each other either as two teams or in a free for all; one player is always human, but the others can either be another person huddled around the Apple or controlled by the reasonable AI. The expansive menu options allow controls to be configured and any of the ten environments to be selected – or the game can choose randomly for each round – it's also possible to disable some of the power-ups, alter the time limit, select how many wins are needed for an overall victory or disable features like the fun rounds and showdowns which add extra elements to the gameplay.

This is a well-presented package that both shows the platform off and has much on offer to keep players entertained, so any fan of the Apple IIGS really should have *Kaboom!* installed on their hard drive for when a couple of friends come over for some frantic and explosive multiplayer fun.



» [Apple IIGS] That'll leave a mark.

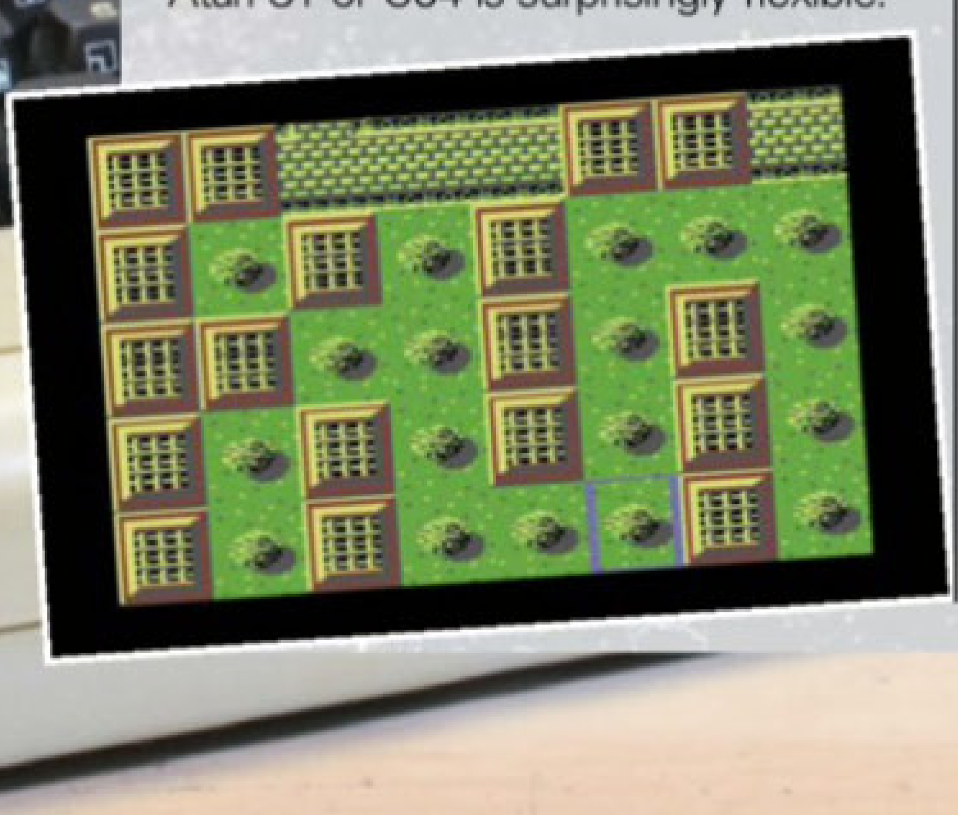
RetroGamer_Mag scored **9** for Kaboom!
9
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

Make this

Every month our very own Jason Kelk will be teaching you handy new programming techniques. This month: construction kits

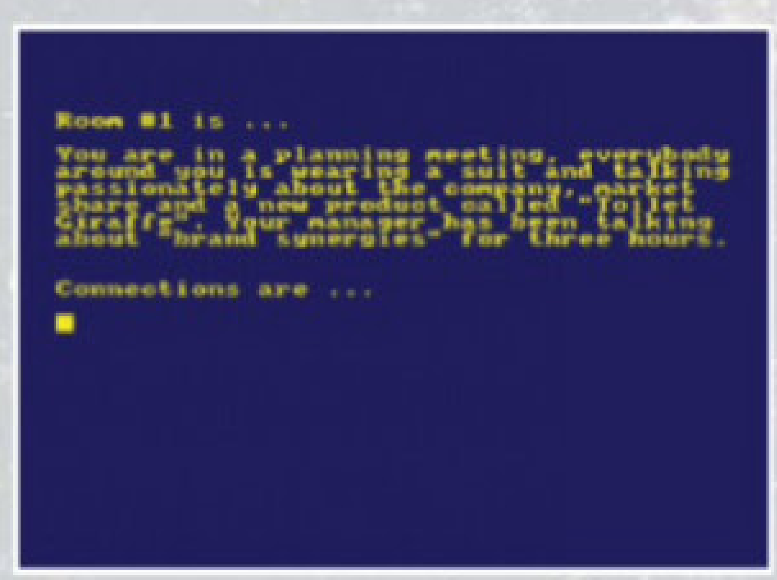
1 So you want to produce games but don't have the skills? That's okay, because there are lots of game creation programs out there. If you fancy making a shooter, the Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit for the Amiga, Atari ST or C64 is surprisingly flexible.





2 And, of course, there are options for the other popular home systems too, like Jonathan Cauldwell's excellent Arcade Game Designer for the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. They are perfect for those who are just starting out.

3 Or how about creating a text-based adventure? The 8-bits in particular are well stocked with tools like The Quill and its extension, The Illustrator, along with the Graphic Adventure Creator which is running on the Amstrad CPC in this screenshot.





4 And then there's the option of 3D worlds with something like the 3D Construction Kit on most of the 8-bit and 16-bit systems. There are loads of other options too, so check the websites for your favourite system to see what is available to you.

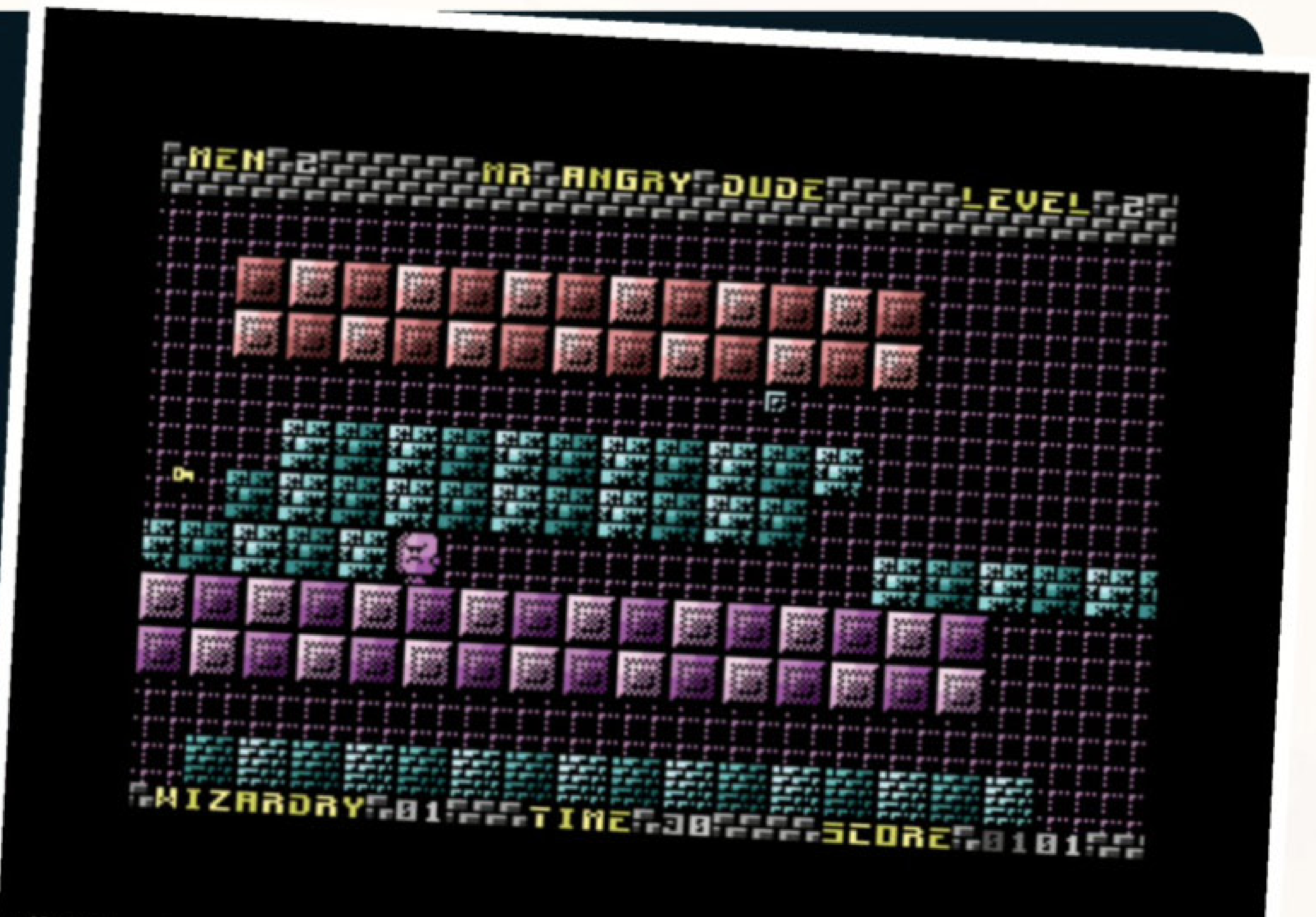
MR ANGRY DUDE

» **FORMAT:** COMMODORE 16 » **DEVELOPER:** MIKA KERÄNEN
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/ANGRY-264 » **PRICE:** FREE

Mr Angry Dude, unsurprisingly, spends his time being annoyed, and since he's become trapped within a series of puzzles his mood isn't set to improve for the foreseeable future. Some platforms can't initially be reached but when Mr Angry Dude moves horizontally he causes everything on his current tile row to shuffle in the same direction, therefore the level can be reorganised. He can also use a limited amount of magic to create or destroy blocks.

There are keys to collect on each stage which must all be gathered to unlock the exit, a strict time limit ticking down on the status panel to worry about and enemies that patrol the platforms which are fatal to the touch, all of which make the game difficult and often frustrating. It isn't going to suit everyone, but does at least allow players to properly empathise with their avatar!

RetroGamer_Mag scored **8** for Mr Angry Dude
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



» [C16] Yo, heave ho.

LANDER 2

» **FORMAT:** SEGA MASTER SYSTEM » **DEVELOPER:** JMIMU
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/LANDER-2-SMS » **PRICE:** FREE



***Lander 2* is about space travel on a budget, with the hero constructing their own compact rocket and boldly going to another world for some exploration.** On arrival there they'll need to guide the craft onto a series of landing pads to make their way across and then into the landscape. The rocket is always pointing upwards and can thrust down, left or right from the D-pad which reverses the controls since it'll accelerate in the opposite direction to the one pushed. Any use of the engines will also burn fuel so it helps to be economical.

Lander 2 is short, but enjoyable to play and there are five skill levels to choose from which will make things challenging once it's been completed. Hopefully we'll see *Lander 3*.

RetroGamer_Mag scored **7** for Lander 2
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

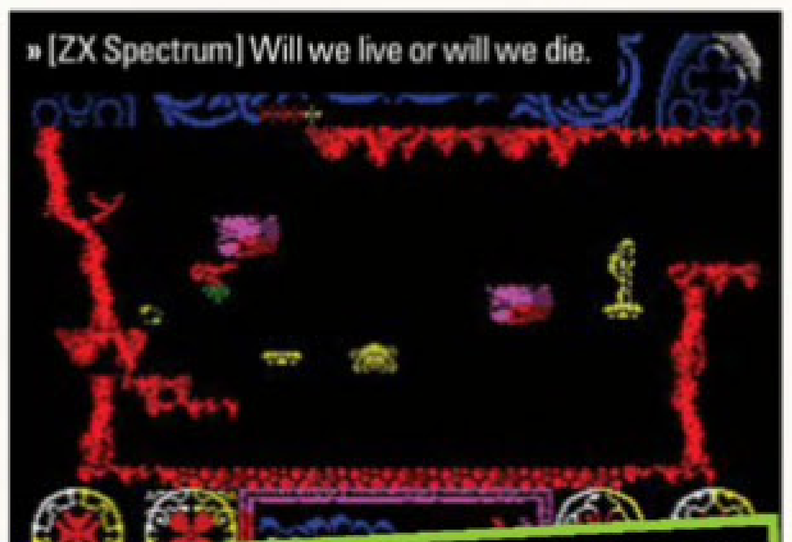


» [Master System] I'm feeling very still.

VADE RETRO

» **FORMAT:** ZX SPECTRUM » **DEVELOPER:** RETROWORKS
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/VADE-RETRO-SPEC » **PRICE:** FREE

» [ZX Spectrum] Will we live or will we die.





Eshur the blacksmith had his fill of sword-wielding action as a young man, leaving his village and stumbling across the sorcerer, Delcram, as he tried to raise an army of zombies. Eshur ultimately won, but swore he'd never fight again, returning home to his old job and happiness.

But you can't keep a bad sorcerer down and Delcram has managed to get himself resurrected, setting up camp beneath Eshur's home town and killing almost everybody. Our hero is left with no choice but to find the pieces of his sword, unseal Delcram's lair, fight to its heart and finish the job.

Platform-based games like this aren't unusual on the Spectrum and *Vade Retro* isn't perfect but its quite a bit of effort has gone into the development.

RetroGamer_Mag scored **9** for Vade Retro
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

BREAK 64

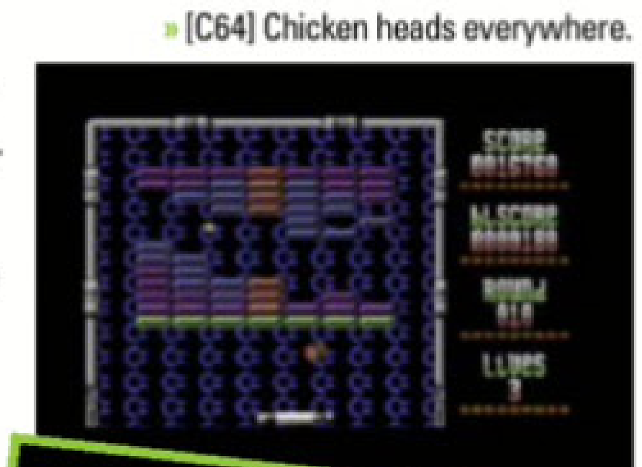
» **FORMAT:** COMMODORE 64 » **DEVELOPER:** WANAX
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/BREAK-C64 » **PRICE:** FREE

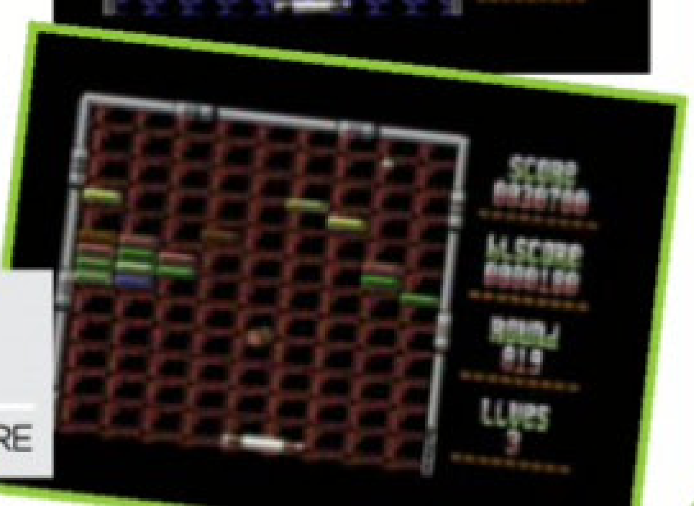
Someone has left loads of coloured bricks lying about so, in the time-honoured tradition of *Breakout* clones, it's your job to dispose of them with just your trusty paddle and a ball. There are bonus objects which appear when a block is destroyed, most of which are for score apart from the strawberry-like item which expands the bat – be careful because this power can be taken away too!

Sadly, it looks and sound nice but *Break 64* has some collision detection issues which see the ball sails past bricks that it would usually be expected to hit. That's a shame really, it might lack many of *Arkanoid*'s bells and whistles but would have been good without the deal-breaking problems.

RetroGamer_Mag scored **6** for Break 64
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

» [C64] Chicken heads everywhere.





MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY… SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON THE ONLINE FORUM – **WWW.RETROGAMER.NET**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a copy of our latest eMag, **Retro Gamer Load 3**, a bargain if ever there was one



STAR LETTER

POTATO HARVEST

Hi **Retro Gamer** crew,
So last year was a bit of a rubbish year after getting diagnosed with testicular cancer. It was also a fantastic year, because after three months of chemotherapy, my oncologist told me I'd smashed it and I had beat the Big C.

While I was on chemo, I hatched a plan to tick one of my big Bucket List items off: to visit a Super Potato store in Japan. Now, being married and with two small kids, I thought this was going to have to wait some years, but my amazing wife, Claire, said, "go for it." So I did.

Two amazing weeks. 26 retro gaming stores in four cities. Nearly a 15kg bag full of games and other goodies. Just don't mention the credit card bill to her.

I love **Retro Gamer** dearly. While every other subscription has faded and ended, I just can't imagine not getting it monthly. Thanks for many years of great reading, I'll be in the UK in July and August, so I'll see if there are any events I can come and say g'day.

Mike Hampshire
Melbourne,
Australia



» Could there be any better location to read a copy of **Retro Gamer**?

We've always wanted to head to a Super Potato store – we get pictures and stories from various friends and readers, and they always look so great. While we're not jealous of the sequence of events that inspired your trip, it does put it into perspective. You never know what will happen tomorrow, so it's important to do the things that make you happy today.

Make sure to keep an eye on both our Facebook and Twitter accounts, as well as the magazine itself, which is where we will mention any events we are heading to this summer. Until then, thanks for all your brilliant pictures and, most importantly, congratulations on overcoming your illness.



» A visit to Nintendo headquarters – a dream for many a retro gamer.

> **"Two amazing weeks. 26 retro gaming stores in four cities. Nearly a 15kg bag full of games"**
> Mike Hampshire

PRESS PLAY ON PROJECTOR

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I am currently reading *Ready Player One*, and was very excited to hear that Steven Spielberg is signed up to direct a movie version! This got me to reminiscing about movies that are based on, or around, videogames.

We had the excellent *Tron*, plus the car crashes that were *Super Mario Bros.* and *Street Fighter*. *Mortal Kombat* and *Tomb Raider* were okay at best, and I really enjoyed *The Wizard* when I was a kid, but that really just seems like a very long Nintendo advert now. Are there any other videogame movies that I've missed here that I should really see?

Often games have such great stories behind them, so I was also thinking about what movies that I would like to see on the silver screen – at the moment I think my favourite would be a film based on the *Monkey Island* series. Plus, *Indiana Jones And The Fate of Atlantis* would make a great film!

Thank you in advance for any of you movie tips and pointers.

Richard Tappenden

You've certainly covered many of the bigger past releases, and most direct adaptations still fall somewhere between the 'bad' and 'okay' brackets. Disney's *Prince Of Persia* is probably the best of those in recent years. If you don't mind subtitles, some Japanese films such as Takashi Miike's adaptation of *Yakuza* are good fun. In any case, it's clear that gaming has a very long way to go to repay cinema for the likes of *GoldenEye*. For films based on videogames, in terms of back catalogue stuff that you might have missed, it's well worth seeking out *The Last Starfighter* and *WarGames*. Both are Eighties films, which only increases the warmth of the nostalgia blanket. The obvious recommendation from recent times is the fantastic *Wreck-It Ralph*, which features loads of retro love. It's much like the *Toy Story* films in that it offers plenty of fun for adults while primarily targeting kids. This summer there's also *Pixels*, an action comedy featuring aliens attempting to invade Earth by mimicking various retro games, in a situation similar to one in the excellent *Futurama* episode, *Anthology Of Interest II*.



» [N64] One day, a film will do for gaming what *GoldenEye 007* did for film. It might take a while though…

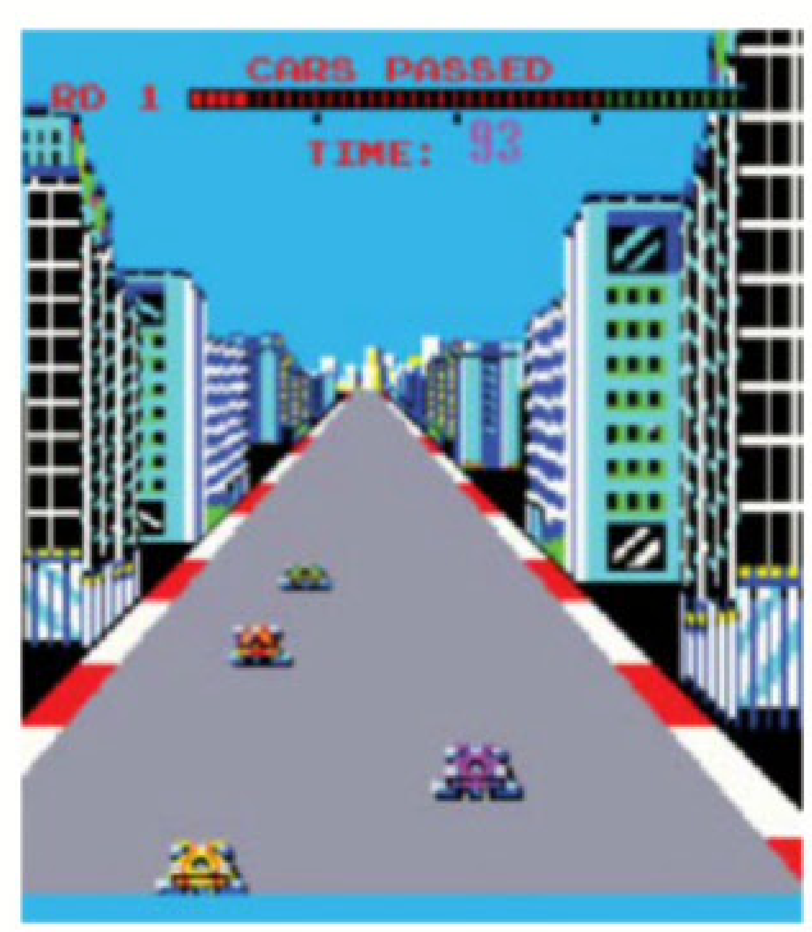
THE LIGHTNING ROUND

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Letter with a difference – some questions for you:

1. Did you ever play the Video City scratchcards?
2. Will you do a feature on the *Computer Warrior* strip in Eagle comic? First two series were fantastic.
3. Do you think that *Zzap!* could have continued like *CU* if they had kept the Amiga coverage?
4. I have all seven issues of the ill-fated *Maximum* magazine. Do you think that it deserved better?

John Ebbs

1: We didn't, but they are quite cool. Nick's got a complete collection of Sega Super Play cards, though.



» [Arcade] Video City scratchcards offered little games based on popular arcade titles like *Turbo* and *Frogger*.

Don't forget to follow us online for all the latest retro updates

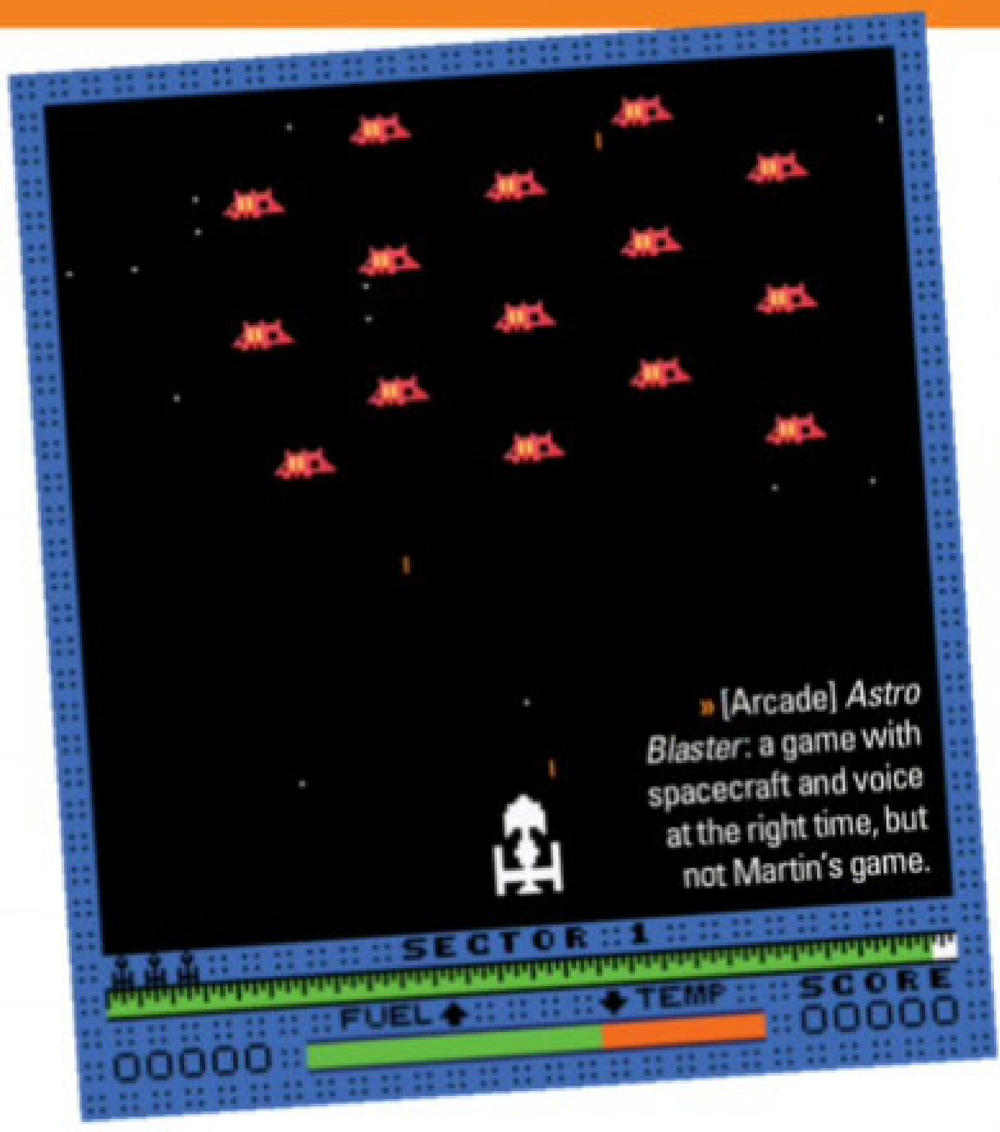
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CONTACT US

Snail Mail: Retro Gamer, Imagine Publishing, Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ

Email: retrogamer@imagine-publishing.co.uk



» [Arcade] *Astro Blaster*: a game with spacecraft and voice at the right time, but not Martin's game.

2. It's certainly not something that we have planned out and might be a little tricky to pull off, but we can look into it. Are any other readers fans of *Computer Warrior*?
3. It's unlikely – though *Zzap!64* was split into *Commodore Force* and *Amiga Force*, neither title survived the demise of Europress Impact. Given that fact, it's unlikely to think they'd have done any better without the split.
4. *Maximum* was certainly excellent, and we'd have loved for it to receive an audience that would have sustained it. But you know what they say – the flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long.

SPEAKING OUT

Hi **Retro Gamer,**
I wonder if you can help me with identifying an arcade game we used to play at school in 1980-1982.

It was an upright arcade-style arcade machine. I remember that a spaceship, or something similar, would try to take away a man from a skyline and the machine would then scream out: "Save me, save me!"

This phrase has stuck in my mind as on one occasion I popped into the Sixth Form common room to grab something, and it was totally empty and quiet. Suddenly, the arcade machine (in demo/standby mode) emitted that phrase and gave me the shock of my life.

I remember enjoying playing the game as a teenager and I just can't seem to remember it!

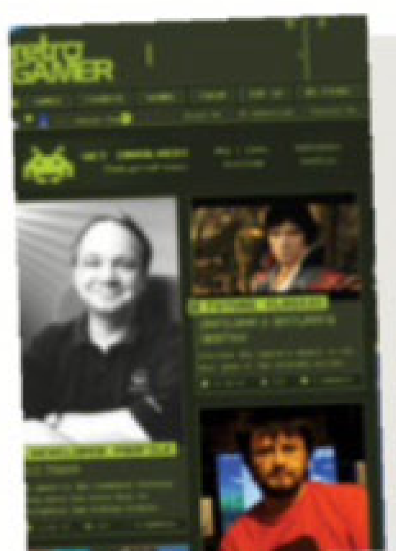
Many thanks,
Martin

Whoever was imploring you to save them might just have to wait a little longer, as it seems that we're just as stumped as you are. We have checked a variety of arcade games featuring speech from that time, from the likes of *Astro Blaster* to *Zektor*, but we can't quite find anything that matches your description. Of course, speech was in its infancy in gaming at this point so most games featuring it were quite notable! Readers, can you help Martin to reconnect with this forgotten arcade game?



DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Jurassic Park
***Jurassic World* is on the way, and everyone's excited as 14 years has been sufficient time to forget the disappointment of the third film. Darran has devoted lunch breaks to *Jurassic Park Builder*, and took time to show us the technically impressive Mega Drive version of *The Lost World*.**



From the forum

» www.retrogamer.net/forum

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on the forum and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

Your F-Zero Memories





dste
I think the thing I like most is the simplicity of it all, just pick a hovercar and race. No weapons, power-ups etc.. It is just good solid and mostly fun racing.

Mayhem
Fire Field on Master… a real test of speed versus energy management!

samhain81
F-Zero was a Christmas present from my family as a child, and it was the first game that earned my appreciation for music in video games, for *F-Zero* has one of the best, if not the best soundtrack of any 16-bit game.

mancman
Owning a Mega Drive at the time it was released and thinking I'd made a mistake when I saw how smooth it was, I had never seen anything like that before!

slacey1070
It moves like lightning… however it's one of those games I'd rather watch someone else play, because I am hopeless at it.

Ryan_McN
My mate owned *F-Zero*, and I can remember the scenery outside of some tracks looking like a pixelated mess. It was only recently I found out that this mess was supposed to be a city.

adippm82
I have to say I hated it for the first hour or so, just could not control the craft at all, just weaved all over the place, then like all the best games it just seemed to click, and I could at last enjoy the game I had waited so long for.

theantmeister
I never really got into *F-Zero* until *F-Zero X* on the N64. The SNES game is good, but I greatly prefer the N64 one.

Matt_B
It's not a game I played when it came out originally, but they had a load of SNES games on the entertainment system for flights with Singapore Airlines for a few years and it was a good one for whiling away a few hours on a long haul flight.

RodimusPrime
I own the PAL, US, and Japanese versions of the SNES, N64, and GameCube games. three versions of each game. Why, I have no idea but they just always survive my clear outs as I can't bear to get rid of any of them.

sscott
Loved the speed and Mode 7, hated slamming into walls constantly though, maybe I was just rubbish?

retro GAMER

Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
+44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.retrogamer.net
www.greatdigitalmags.com

Magazine team
Editor **Darran Jones**
retrogamer@imagine-publishing.co.uk
01202 586237
Editor In Chief **Ryan King**
Art Editor **Jonathan Wells**
Senior Staff Writer **Nick Thorpe**
Production Editor **Drew Sleep**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**
Publishing Director **Aaron Asadi**
Head of Design **Ross Andrews**

Contributors
Adam Barnes, Richard Burton, Martyn Carroll, James Churchill, David Crookes, Paul Davies, Paul Drury, Jason Kelk, Kieren Hawken, Graeme Mason, Rory Milne

Advertising
Digital or printed media packs are available on request
Head of Sales Hang Deretz
01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell
01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International
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Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
+44 (0) 1202 586401
licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

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Circulation
Head of Circulation Darren Pearce
01202 586200

Production
Production Director Jane Hawkins
01202 586200

Finance
Finance Director Marco Peroni

Founder
Group Managing Director Damian Butt

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GamesYouLoved

This month Chris Hill tell us how a group of friends set up their excellent website GamesYouLoved.com which is dedicated to classic videogames and other pastimes



» Chris shows great taste in games by having a blast on Atari's *Star Wars*.

Why did you decide to set up GamesYouLoved?
It started back in 2002 with a few close friends and I discussing the idea of creating a tribute to games we had played over the years. We had all been born in the early Seventies and had grown up with the arcades and early computers and consoles of that era, so we had a common experience and interest.

But back in 2002 the ideas we had couldn't work online as the internet wasn't ready for video, so it waited until ten years later for us to bring the GamesYouLoved brand together. It had changed names and ideas over the years too (even being a shop at one point). But the main idea is that we wanted to share the world's experience of gaming rather than just focus it on us. It's really been that community collective experience we set out to harness from the beginning that has kept us going.

Are you dedicated to just videogames or do you cover other aspects of retro?
Videogames are the main focus but we are nostalgia freaks and love anything retro! We collect most things that are vintage from comics to toys, and in fact have just started ToysYouLoved on which is growing pretty fast, too.

Is this a full-time job or something you do in your spare time?
This is a full-time/part-time job if you get my meaning! We are all full-time working on other things but we dedicate a lot of our spare time to this passion. We couldn't do it if we didn't love doing it day in, day out.



You've grown a quick online profile via Twitter and Facebook. How have you achieved this?
Pretty easy – just constant interaction with the gaming community and sharing content they hopefully enjoy. Also trying to show things from smaller Twitter accounts to the world, which gives them some good coverage and exposure.

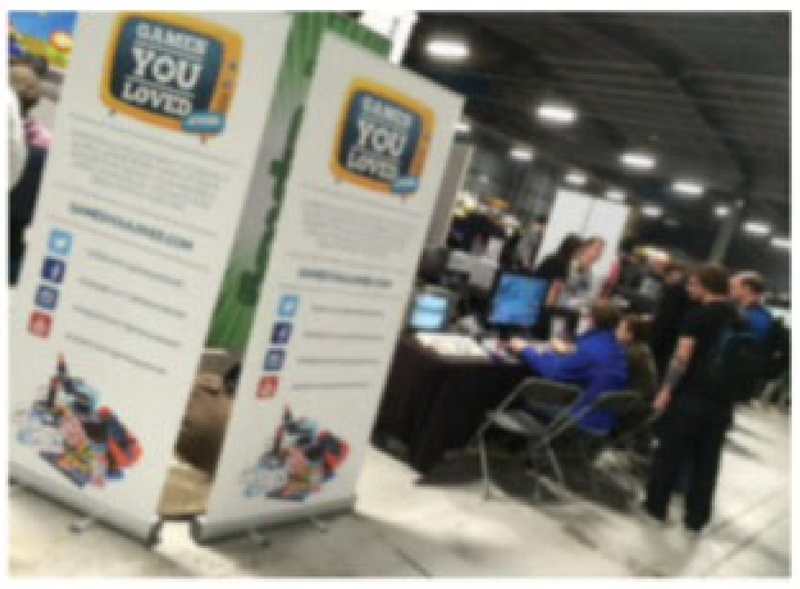
> **"We had all been born in the early Seventies and had grown up with the arcades and early computers"**
> Chris Hill

What separates GamesYouLoved from other gaming websites?
We are more than a website I would say – I think the social media is the key thing that makes us different because as we have a lot of very interesting followers in the community who love to share their content with us and we then share that for them on a daily basis. Essentially because it's not about us all the time – it's the community. That's what makes it interesting for people to see and follow us for.

Why have you gotten involved with numerous Kickstarters?
Mainly because there are some really exciting new retro gaming related products out there and Kickstarter is the go-to place for innovation in the gaming world very often. We have people approach us regularly to promote their Kickstarters and we are selective in choosing the right ones that our community might be interested in.

How important is it to visit various retro shows around the UK?
It's a key thing for us to go to events – meeting people and socialising in the retro gaming scene really is the big thing. We get a chance to cover the event with video and photography, too.

» GamesYouLoved like to have a presence in the retro community. Look out for the guys at your local event.



What's your favourite console?
Wow, what a question. It should be a Printztronic Videosport 800 Colour! This was my first console given to me and my brother by my parents in the Seventies. However, if forced to decide, I'd say the SNES and Mega Drive as a close second. The SNES had so many unique classic titles that it makes it pretty special to me.

How can readers contribute to GamesYouLoved?
On social media they can contribute every day. Also people can submit reviews and articles via our website as well. We have built up quite a large review section over the last two years and we're very grateful to our community for this. *



» The console that started Chris's obsession with the world of videogames.

Get more information by visiting gamesyouloved.com



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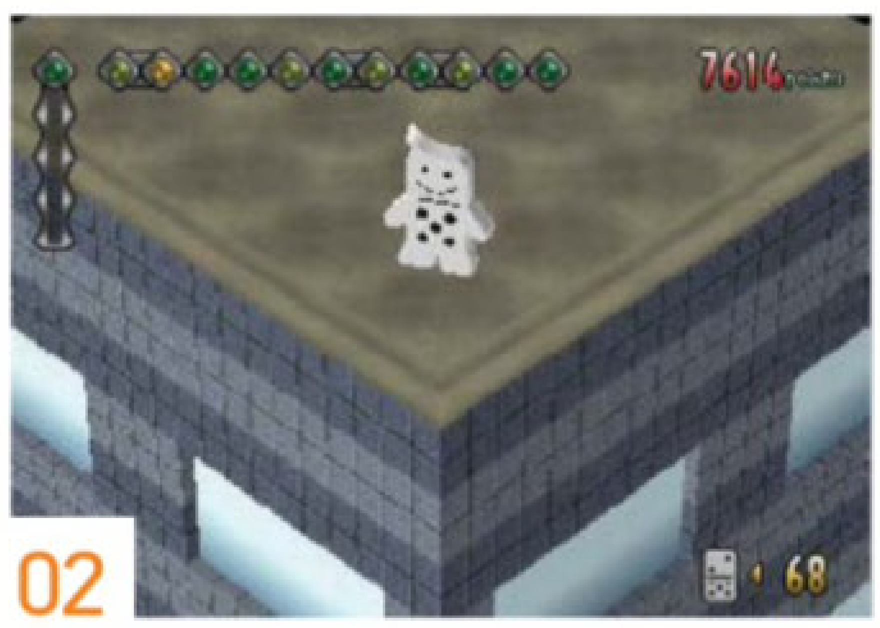
NO ONE CAN STOP MR DOMINO

» A huge audience can embolden publishers, and the PlayStation's was once the hugest of them all – so naturally, it had some pretty unusual games. Take this oddity from Artdink, in which you play as the titular Mr Domino, who runs around causing chaos. Like we said, it's an unusual game, and this ending lives up to that by taking an unexpectedly dark turn...



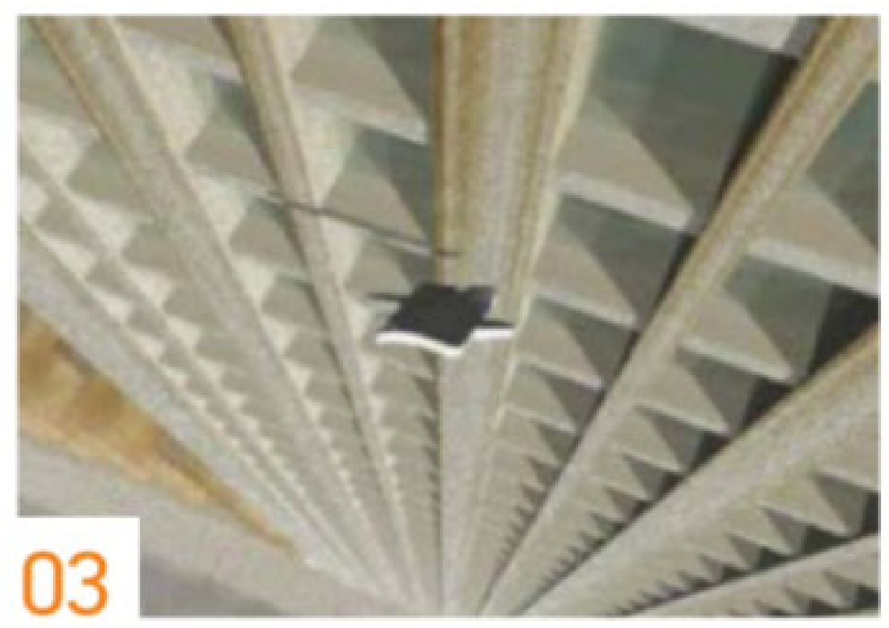
01

» Mr Domino has gone mad with power. What started as some innocent domino-toppling became a deadly game, with our protagonist blowing people up with bombs, causing car crashes and generally being a murderous jerk.



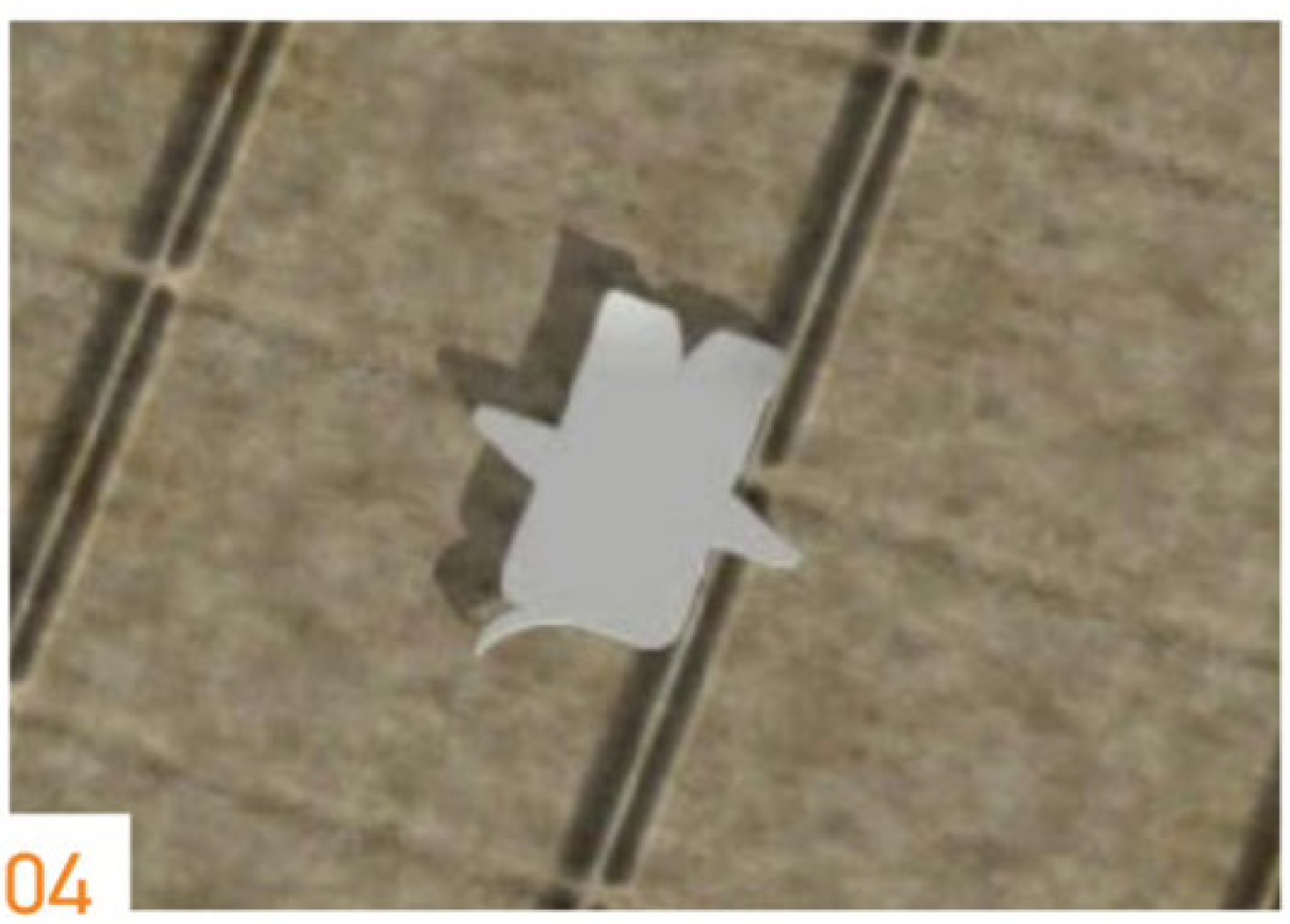
02

» There's always a point of no return, though, and Mr Domino has reached his. As he stands atop a skyscraper contemplating his actions, he can hear the police sirens below. He's tired of running, and he's sick of what he's become.



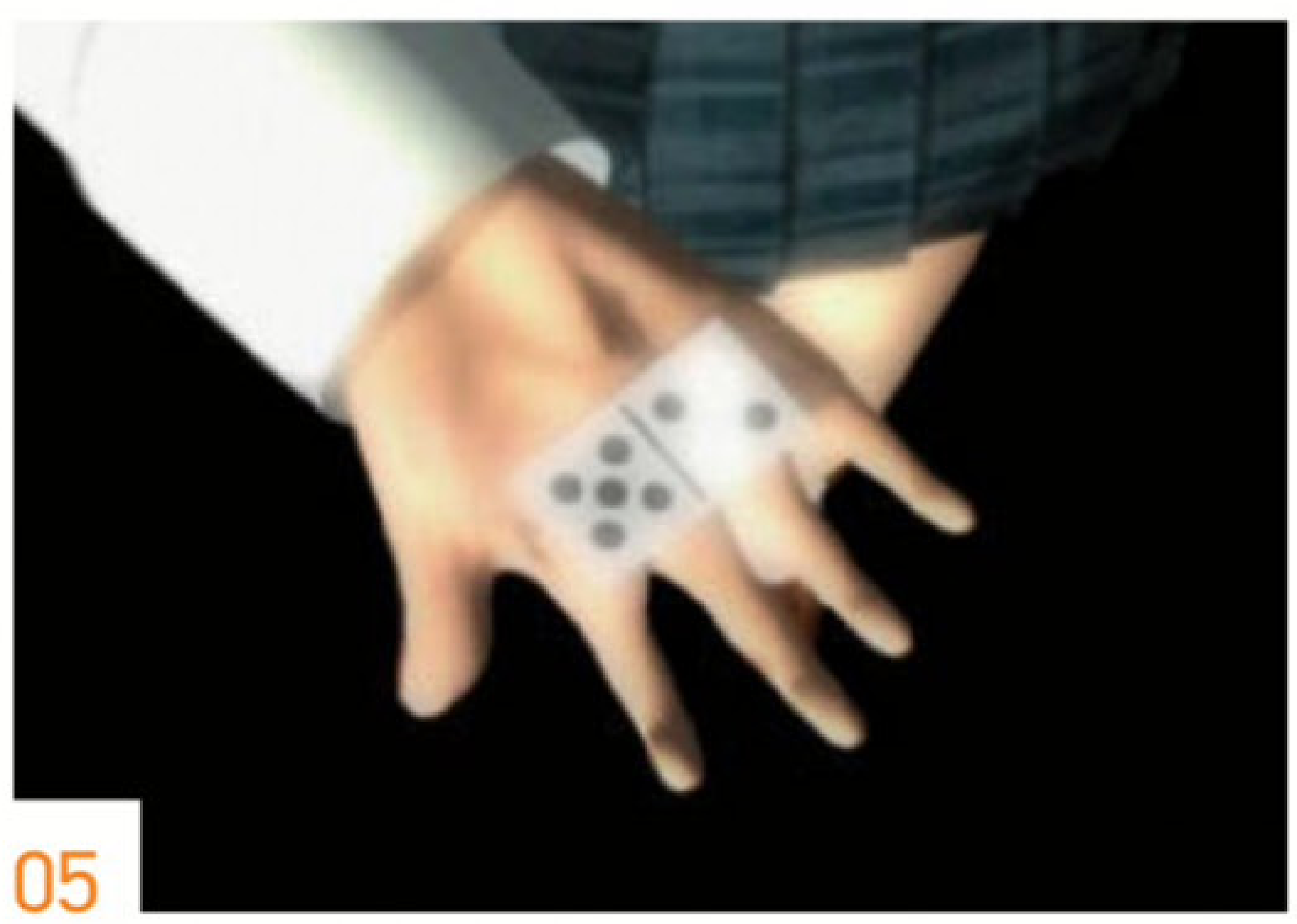
03

» Faced with life imprisonment, the monochromatic maniac takes his fate into his own hands. As he plummets towards the ground, his final thoughts revolve around how a certain pizza chain will rebrand itself after this killing spree.



04

» As he slams into the floor with all the speed that gravity can afford him, Mr Domino shatters, losing his humanoid features and reverting back to the form of a regular old domino. We can only be pleased by this development – without legs, he can no longer spread terror in our towns and cities.



05

» But there's always a twist! This passing lady notices the former Mr Domino lying on the floor, and decides to pick up his remains and take them home. Now it's only a matter of time before this unwitting innocent falls victim to the curse of Mr Domino, and the killing resumes...


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